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Official Records

4th meeting
Thursday, 7 June 2001, 3 p.m.
New York

President: Mr. Holkeri ..... (Finland)

The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

Agenda items 8, 9 and 10 (*continued*)

Review and appraisal of progress made in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda

Note by the Secretary-General (A/S-25/3 and Add.1)

Further actions and initiatives for overcoming obstacles to the implementation of the Habitat Agenda

Declaration on cities and other human settlements in the new millennium

The President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Joseph Oliva Franklin, Director General of the National Office of Old-Age Insurance of Haiti.

Mr. Franklin (Haiti) (*spoke in French*): With the expansion of social housing policies, especially in the context of modernization, priority must be given to human settlements as well as to health care and education. In Haiti, Habitat II has given fresh impetus to efforts in the human settlements sector, which has led the State to elaborate a new policy in this area.

Today, in the general context of globalization, liberalization of the economy, greater availability of information and increased decentralization of social and political life, this special session gives us the opportunity to reaffirm the commitments we have undertaken with respect to the Habitat Agenda as well as our common determination to decide on the measures and initiatives that must be taken in order to implement it.

Since Istanbul, Haiti has been deploying intensive efforts in this area. However, many obstacles continue to hinder our work.

Let me touch on the main problems affecting the human settlements sector.

First, there is insufficient production of housing units and a tremendous shortage of housing, infrastructure and services — the result of not enough land in urban areas, even for State projects. This has led to an uncontrolled use of the land, with the attendant risks to the environment. Secondly, technical and institutional resources are insufficient for the promotion of housing, infrastructures and services.

These problems are rooted, in particular, in the lack of financial resources in the country; the fragility of the State, and in particular of the local authorities, which hinders the decentralization process; and the absence of appropriate legislation and information networks that are suited to today's realities.

In resolving these problems and in the implementation of Habitat II, the State of Haiti, with the assistance of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements and the United Nations Development Programme, decided to create an intersectoral committee on human settlements responsible for developing a human settlements and housing policy.

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That policy, which was introduced in May 1997, aims to deal with the human settlements crisis with a view to achieving a better balance between the requirements of economic development, protection of the environment and improvement of the living conditions of the poorest sectors of society.

Among the myriad government efforts aimed at the implementation of this policy are an analysis of the environmental profile of the capital; urban redevelopment programmes; and four projects for the construction of residential units near the capital, with a fifth in the country's third city, Les Cayes.

Other initiatives are under way, involving efforts by other actors, whose goal is to raise the awareness of the general public and to mobilize resources. These deserve to be mentioned in their own right: an urban planning week, a seminar/workshop on decentralized planning, and a workshop on housing.

Since President Jean Bertrand Aristide took power on 7 February 2001, the Government is hewing to a policy of continuity in the area of human settlements. The major programmes being considered relate to roads, ports and airports, transportation, energy, communications and housing. In this respect, the Government intends, among other things, to set up a land development programme; determine the focal points of urban areas on the basis of their potential; revise land-related legislation; build adequate and affordable housing for all; and work jointly with the traditional financial sector, public housing agencies, municipalities and micro-credit cooperatives. Efforts will be made in the context of programmes to rehabilitate shantytowns, and rural areas will also be the focus of attention.

Particular attention will be given to the construction of administrative complexes in towns and districts, the restoration of historic buildings and the modernization of equipment in public offices.

Uncontrolled urban growth will have increasingly direct repercussions on the majority of the population in terms of health, education and law and order. It will give rise to new forms of marginalization, both economic and social, and will thus represent a threat to the stability of the democratic system. Soon, in 2004, the Republic of Haiti will celebrate the two hundredth anniversary of its independence, and the challenges we must meet are tremendous.

We are in a trap of sorts: our weak economy is undermining our efforts to improve our economic policy and eradicate poverty. Our investment needs are tremendous, as the physical infrastructure is shockingly inadequate. Indeed, in the areas of training human resources, health care and the maintenance of an effective civil service, we will rely greatly on our partners with a view to enhancing prospects for the well-being of the people of Haiti, in particular the most vulnerable segments of the population: women, children and the destitute.

We hope that the Member States and the United Nations system as a whole will note the efforts that have already been made and help Haiti in its determined efforts to overcome the many difficulties facing it on the path to development.

The President: I give the floor to His Excellency the Honourable Nicky Iyambo, Minister of Regional and Local Government and Housing of Namibia.

Mr. Iyambo (Namibia): It is a pleasure for me and my delegation to see you, Mr. President, presiding over this important session. We are confident that your experience and leadership will guide us as we review and appraise the implementation of the outcome of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II). This session marks an important milestone in the history of Habitat, and we therefore hope that it will contribute substantially to the improvement of human settlements and thus be a dream realized.

As part of its commitment to the Habitat Agenda, the Government of Namibia established the National Habitat Committee to coordinate and monitor the process of implementing the Habitat Agenda. The preparation of our national country report coincided with the formulation of the Second National Development Plan. Indeed, this was a very rewarding exercise that enabled us to evaluate and assess the human settlement situation in the country and also to identify constraints, challenges and strategies in the implementation process. In addition, relevant policies, legislation, programmes and other interventions have since been formulated within the framework of the Habitat Agenda.

Housing has been identified by the Government of Namibia as one of the priority areas in the development of the country. Our Constitution emphasizes the promotion of equal access to adequate and affordable shelter, water, a safe environment and

other basic services as an integral part of the fundamental rights and freedoms to be enjoyed by the people of Namibia. The housing programme in Namibia has added value to the social and economic well-being of low-income families. In this context, low-income groups are enabled to have access to land and enjoy security of tenure. In this exercise, emphasis is placed on community participation in the construction of the houses. This process provides employment opportunities to small builders and their families, resulting in the reduction of poverty and unemployment.

Despite these concerted efforts of the Government and its partners, the population growth in the cities places a tremendous demand on housing and basic services. Rural-urban migration is increasing. However, to reverse the rural-urban migration trend, we have identified new growth points, and 13 towns were proclaimed during the implementation of our First National Development Plan.

The promotion of a just society for all has been duly attended to and is reflected in legislation and policies instituted by the Government, such as the Affirmative Action Act, Married Persons Equality Act and the national policy on disability. At the same time, various government institutions have been given the task of promoting equal opportunity and social integration for disadvantaged groups. A social housing programme has been developed that targets old-age pensioners, persons with disabilities and destitute people, thereby enhancing a sense of esteem and dignity among these groups.

In spite of these efforts, the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the scarcity of water in Namibia have a negative impact on development projects that are intended to reduce poverty. In this connection, our Cabinet has approved White Papers on HIV/AIDS and water resource management.

With regard to economic development, the Government provides incentives for the informal business sector through a guaranteed credit scheme. Small business entrepreneurs have access to financial institutions where they can obtain loans to start their own businesses. Eighty per cent of these loans are guaranteed by the Government. This initiative not only enhances economic empowerment of poor groups, but it also reduces unemployment and alleviates poverty. These incentives are in line with the principles of the Habitat Agenda and the global plan of action, as well as the aims and objectives of Agenda 21 to ensure sustainable development.

It pleases me to inform this Assembly that decentralization of power to the regional and local authorities, as enshrined in the Namibian Constitution, has progressively continued since 1998. Through the decentralization process the people at the grass-roots level are able to partake in the decision-making processes affecting their lives. To ensure effective planning and implementation of the decentralization process, development committees have been established at local, constituency and regional levels.

Regarding international cooperation, the Government of Namibia, as a signatory to the Istanbul Declaration, will continue to coordinate with other Governments and other Habitat Agenda partners to exchange ideas and learn from their experiences in the struggle for "adequate shelter for all" and "sustainable human settlements".

Furthermore, the Government through the Ministry of Regional and Local Government and Housing, in partnership with the National Housing Enterprise and community-based organizations, has committed itself to establishing a research centre, which, among other tasks, will provide information on the availability of local building materials and best building methods. It is the intention of the Government to utilize national and international expertise to help in enriching the research portfolio of the centre.

In conclusion, the Government of Namibia reaffirms its commitment to the objectives of the Habitat Agenda, "adequate shelter for all" and "sustainable human settlements development". Namibia will explore all possibilities at our disposal to achieve those objectives. In this endeavour, we are part of the global family, and we believe that our success will be determined by our commitment to achieve what we have set as our goal.

The President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Natan Sharansky, Minister of Construction and Housing of Israel.

Mr. Sharansky (Israel): Israel's allegiance to the Habitat Agenda places our citizens at the focus of all our policies for shelter and sustainable development. We have developed integrated housing solutions for various population groups, with strategies that

recognize the differing needs and abilities of our citizens.

In order to promote homeownership, we provide subsidized mortgages for all first-time home-buyers, based on established socio-economic criteria. The combination of progressive mortgage packages, transparent criteria and privatized servicing has allowed us to reach an overall homeownership level of more than 70 per cent.

Our high level of homeownership is quite remarkable in the light of our history of immigrant absorption. Over the past decade, Israel has successfully absorbed more than 1 million immigrants, many of them poor families from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia, representing an increase of approximately 20 per cent of our national population. To help immigrant absorption, our Government provides especially generous mortgage packages, which have resulted in a homeownership rate among new immigrants that is virtually as high as that of the general population.

I can personally attest to the effectiveness of these shelter policies, since I myself came to Israel as a new immigrant in the late 1980s and benefited from our country's assistance programmes.

I wish to emphasize that our policy of immigrant absorption has operated alongside our commitment to meet the needs of veteran Israeli households. We have developed special assistance packages for young couples, single-parent households, single persons, the elderly and persons with physical disabilities. They are available without exception to the entire spectrum of Israeli society, veterans and immigrants, Jews and Arabs. Furthermore, to help promote sustainable development nationwide I, as Minister of the Interior, sponsored the preparation of numerous master plans, including almost 30 local outlying plans, for Arab cities and towns.

Certain delegations have regrettably chosen to appropriate the present session to level unfounded political attacks against Israel, rather than contribute in a productive manner to the discussion. I sincerely regret that I am now obliged to depart from my intended statement to address those accusations.

I come here straight from the heartbreaking funerals where parents buried 20 teenage daughters and sons who were brutally massacred in a Tel Aviv discotheque this past Friday. Even after witnessing such gruesome carnage — the most recent and most violent manifestation of an eight-month terror campaign — Israel is exercising restraint. In the meantime, in order to give peace yet another chance, we have chosen not to use our military capabilities. In spite of that unprecedented policy of restraint, we are being accused, from this rostrum, of using excessive force. In fact, Israel is facing an unparalleled and coordinated campaign of terror orchestrated by the Palestinian leadership, which has also contributed scores of soldiers to this war by releasing convicted terrorists from Palestinian jails.

We, as housing ministers and habitat experts, all know that a strong foundation is critical for building a durable structure. The Oslo peace process, which once offered so much promise, was founded on a commitment to non-violence, based on our hope that the terrorists of yesterday had become our partners for peace. Eight years later, the leaders, who have once again become the indisputable champions of terrorism, are threatening the structure of peace.

We empathize with the suffering of the Palestinians, but the fact remains that much of their suffering is the result of the misguided policies of their own leadership. The achievement of a true and durable peace will be realized only when Governments are accountable to their peoples and are truly committed to the advancement and welfare of their citizens.

As for Israel's 6 million citizens, who do indeed live under a democratic Government, they are being blackmailed by terrorists who are striving to make life's daily routine unbearable and who are falsely portraying settlements as the central obstacle to peace. The international community must not legitimize this pursuit of political objectives through violence and terrorism.

Israel is a country that is at the forefront of the free world's struggle against terrorism. Surrendering to the blackmail of terrorists will inevitably encourage and strengthen them throughout the world. Accordingly, it should be in the interest of all free nations to work together to subdue terrorist organizations and to prevent them from subverting the will of free peoples.

In our case, it was previously agreed that the issue of settlements would be raised within the context of bilateral negotiations on a final status agreement.

Cessation of violence, by contrast, is not a matter to be negotiated or to be switched on and off at will. The cessation of violence is a basic precondition of all compromises entailed in the peace process. That formula dates back to 1993, and is one to which both parties have agreed.

The cessation of violence is also the central recommendation of the report of the Mitchell Committee, which Israel has endorsed in all its aspects. This remains the cornerstone of all the other measures that are to follow. Terror and violence must stop before we can move forward.

I wish to conclude by reaffirming Israel's commitment to the goals and principles of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, and to the need to promote integrated urban and regional growth. We must reconfirm the interdependence of human settlements around the globe and work to enhance the living conditions of all 6 billion citizens of the world. Israel looks forward to the day when safe and secure shelter will be achieved and when the dictum of the prophet Isaiah will finally be realized: peace, peace for those both far and near.

The President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Seydou Sy Sall, Minister of Town Planning and National and Regional Development of Senegal.

Mr. Sall (Senegal) (*spoke in French*): I wish at the outset to congratulate you, Mr. President, and the other members of the Bureau on your election, and to wish you every success in guiding the work of the special session of the General Assembly for an overall review and appraisal of the implementation of the outcome of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II). I pay special tribute to the Secretary-General, His Excellency Mr. Kofi Annan, and to applaud the admirable thrust of his opening statement.

This session is taking place at a crucial time in the history of the United Nations, when most of the questions asked by States and peoples about the management of human settlements remain unanswered. Senegal understands the importance of the Istanbul achievements. That is why, in line with the position of the African Group, we strongly support the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat). Senegal welcomes the recent appointment of Ms. Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka as Executive Director of Habitat; she will enjoy the unreserved support of my Government.

The delegation of Senegal attaches great importance to the present special session. It must remind mankind of the crucial need to strengthen the fight against poverty and the lack of security, which are the two major obstacles to controlled urban growth and to improving the living conditions of urban populations.

The new human settlements policy formulated by His Excellency Mr. Abdoulaye Wade, President of the Republic of Senegal, is in line with that approach. An important part of that policy is the strengthening of policies and mechanisms to give direction to the Habitat II follow-up process.

Let me outline some of Senegal's activities to implement the Habitat Agenda.

I would recall first that, last January, Senegal adopted a new Constitution following a referendum. It formally guarantees the right to property ownership to men and women alike. All of the earlier impediments to that right, be they legal or customary, were eliminated. The new Constitution gives women the right to receive land, own it and to manage their own patrimony and personal property. It also includes rights for the handicapped and the aged.

At another level, it lays particular stress on the development of the organizational capacity of local communities, which now enjoy broader authority. This allows the daily management of human settlements to fall primarily to local authorities. Moreover, I am pleased to recall that, in entrenching the process of decentralization, regionalism has been practised since 1996. This is a decisive milestone in our search for harmonious development between towns and rural areas in our region and helps to strengthen its economy. The adoption of a local communities charter, as set forth by the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat), allowing more openness in the activities of local authorities in the management of human settlements, should consolidate these achievements.

In addition, in response to the many difficulties encountered in coordination by urban entities, our country recently adopted a 10-year urbanization programme in the region of Dakar, the capital, at the heart of which is the establishment of a joint

committee. This 10-year programme, an integral part of the plan of action adopted this year by the Government in the urban planning and habitat sector, is designed, as recommended by Habitat II, to enhance private initiative and to promote a synergetic participation of local authorities, the private sector, non-governmental organizations and populations. The production of housing will be facilitated by means of regular contact between the State and its various partners. This strategy is expected to yield a yearly output from developers and housing cooperatives of 12,000 housing units.

With respect to infrastructure, the follow-up to Habitat II has been characterized by an intensification of the policy of establishing social networks in the distribution of water. Important programmes are being undertaken in this field. These programmes also aim at reducing the water shortage in Dakar and secondary centres by setting up an effective and operational distribution system for drinking water by means of modern and reliable networks.

Mr. Pradhan (Bhutan), Vice-President, took the Chair.

I would like to mention the strategy developed within the new policy for restructured land tenure, which has been strengthened by the establishment of the Droit à la Ville Foundation to coordinate the activities of the various actors in this field. The restructuring, which has already begun, will allow the land-tenure situation of over 100,000 families to be regularized and substantially to improve their living conditions. The land-tenure restructuring and regularization will be pursued with the international support. They will be given high priority in the programmes launched by the various actors involved in human settlements management. Improving the people's living conditions is an important aspect of these activities and an integral part of the national anti-poverty campaign that has just been launched with the invaluable help of the United Nations Development Programme.

Finally, in order to bolster the activities under way in my country, legislative and regulatory texts governing the management of this sector will be adapted to the new environment of decentralization. This adaptation will focus primarily on the urban planning code, the revision of which was recently completed, and on the building code currently being drafted.

I shall conclude by expressing the wish that this session in New York will confirm the commitment undertaken in Istanbul to mobilizing significant resources to ensure the practicable development of living standards in the towns and villages. I solemnly reiterate the firm will of Senegal to contribute to the implementation of the Habitat Agenda in order to ensure secure, viable and sustainable human settlements.

The Acting President: I give the floor to His Excellency the Honourable Alfonso Gagliano, Minister of Public Works and Services of Canada.

Mr. Gagliano (Canada) (*spoke in French*): It is an honour for me to represent Canada at this special session of the General Assembly to review progress made in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda since 1996.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Canadian delegation with me today. In the spirit of the Istanbul Declaration and the Habitat Agenda, we are pleased to have in our delegation representatives of all Canadian Habitat partners. We believe that the successful implementation of the Habitat Agenda requires the full involvement of Canadian partners in human settlements activities.

Canadians are fortunate to be relatively well-housed. They enjoy good access to housing markets and to the financing necessary to home ownership. Housing technology is on the leading edge. Our communities are economically and socially vibrant and increasingly environmentally conscious.

(*spoke in English*)

The Canada report recognizes that most Canadians are well-housed in healthy and supportive communities. However, a number of key challenges remain in the areas of aboriginal housing, rental-housing supply and affordability, and homelessness. Governments are committed to working together to address these issues. Canada is committed to advancing sustainable development and healthy housing practices to reduce energy consumption, to protect occupant health, to ensure quality water and to encourage sustainable community planning and design. Canada will continue to work on both the domestic and

international fronts to meet its sustainable development commitments.

C nada prides itself on having an inclusive society, one that encourages civic engagement and public participation. Just as a strong economy allows us to pursue our social values, an inclusive society is a prerequisite to a strong economy. Through our progressive tax system, active measures and social safety net, Canada has been able to limit the social and economic costs of social exclusion. Most Canadian families have benefited from rising incomes and greater economic freedom. However, there are still many challenges we must face, including addressing poverty and removing the barriers to full participation in society for those at risk of being left behind. This is particularly important for our children.

The promotion of gender equality is a fundamental element of sustainable human settlement development. Through domestic and international activities, Canada will continue to promote the empowerment of women and their full and equal participation in all spheres of society.

In recent years, Canada has substantially increased the collaboration and coordination of Canadian partners working in international cooperation and development. Canada's support for international cooperation is exemplified by commitments on world poverty issues and support provided to economic development and local capacity development. We have been working increasingly in partnership with both developing countries and countries in transition. We also support greater collaboration and coherence in all our international cooperation activities.

(*spoke in French*)

With the issuing of the Canadian International Development Agency's document entitled "Social development priorities: an action framework", Canada will be concentrating greater effort on health and nutrition, basic education, HIV/AIDS and child protection. Other Canadian development assistance priorities include basic human needs, gender equality, protection of the environment, human rights and governance, private sector development and infrastructure services.

While our country faces a number of challenges, we can be proud of the progress made since 1996. In closing, I would like to add that Canada remains committed to the goals and principles of the Istanbul Declaration and the Habitat Agenda.

The Acting President. I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Claude Bartolone, Minister for the Cities, of France.

Mr. Bartolone (France) (*spoke in French*): On behalf of the French delegation, I first wish to underscore that I fully subscribe to the terms of the statement delivered yesterday by the Swedish representative on behalf of the European Union. This convergence of views is not surprising, since in Europe we are all unwaveringly loyal to the Istanbul message. After Habitat II no one could ignore that the future of our countries will be played out primarily in the cities, in the North and as well as in the South. But I am not sure that everybody, at all levels of responsibility, has understood this sufficiently.

This is why I, along with many others, fervently hope that this special session will succeed in remobilizing international opinion as to the scope, acuteness and complexity of the challenges still facing all the cities of the world. For that we need a robust final declaration, resolutely political, which extends and amplifies the Istanbul conclusions and is able to have a real impact on world opinion.

If we are going to overcome the risks attached to the tide of urbanization and seize the opportunities it offers, we must do everything possible to implement the global plan of action adopted in Istanbul as swiftly as possible.

We are assembled here to take first stock of the progress achieved and the difficulties remaining. Let us do this clear-sightedly and without complacency. It is obvious that much remains to be done. Even if we must act quickly, implementing the Habitat Agenda requires a long period of time.

In France, the Government to which I belong and the local authorities have resolutely embarked on the course set in Istanbul. Since 1996, major reforms have profoundly modernized our habitat and urban policy. The fight against exclusion and the exercise of the right to housing have received fresh impetus. The institutional framework for local authorities was considerably reformed to adapt it to the development of cities. New tools for urban planning were introduced, better coordinating sectoral policies and taking better account of local realities and expectations.

The basic goals of social and territorial solidarity, urban diversity, sustainable development and good governance inspire all government action from now on. Thus, the resources devoted to rehabilitating struggling neighbourhoods and socially reintegrating their inhabitants have been greatly increased, so that those men and women benefit, like the rest of the French population, from the return to economic growth.

More generally, fresh impetus has been given to the idea of contract between the State, the territorial authorities and their civil society partners, with a view to combining their respective efforts behind joint projects aimed at both social solidarity and local development. Measures have also been taken to increase the local residents' participation in decisions that concern them and to ensure that the city once again becomes what it should never have stopped being: a favoured place for democracy and citizenship.

As is evident, France has rallied strongly behind the two main themes of the Istanbul summit: adequate shelter for all, and the sustainable development of human settlements.

The French Government believes that the public authorities have a decisive role to play. Whatever its merits, the market alone cannot make a city economically efficient, ecologically prudent and socially harmonious, any more than it can provide access to decent housing and acceptable services to all. Public intervention is vital to regulate markets, to lend support to families with the most modest incomes and to ensure a controlled collective approach to the development of every city. The quality of urban organization and management implies resolute action by public authorities at the local level, but also at the national level.

For us, the city must henceforth be viewed as a primary target for collective action and as a genuine issue for government.

We are therefore particularly interested in a successful outcome to the proceedings of this special session. Of course we do not want it to afford anyone the slightest opportunity to renege on the commitments undertaken in Istanbul. We also hope that it will promote decentralization and will strengthen the capacities of local government, in accordance with the legal framework of each State. We expect a great deal from the consultations among national delegations, the representatives of associations of local officials, non-governmental organizations and other partners of the Habitat Agenda. We hope that the thematic dialogues that exemplify partnership action will be one of the session's highlights.

Finally, we also hope that this session will result in a stronger involvement on the part of all international organizations, especially the competent United Nations agencies, in implementing the global plan of action adopted in Istanbul. In particular we must enhance the coordinating and impetus-providing role conferred on the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements in Nairobi.

Finally, I wish to stress the vital contribution that cities can and must make to the broad objectives of sustainable development. It is important in this regard that the World Summit on Sustainable Development, to be held in Johannesburg next year, should explicitly take the human dimension into consideration.

The Acting President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Mohamed Elyazghi, Minister of National and Regional Development, Town-Planning, Habitat and Environment of Morocco.

Mr. Elyazghi (Morocco) (*spoke in Arabic*): Since the convening of the second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), the development of human settlements in Morocco and the implementation of the Habitat Agenda have come to be placed in a political context marked by the will of the Moroccan Government to make social development and combating poverty one of its basic priorities. These actions are consistent with the commitment of the Kingdom of Morocco to the implementation of the principles and recommendations adopted in Istanbul in 1996, and measures are now being taken to ensure the full application of those principles and recommendations.

In this context, the Kingdom of Morocco is completing a broad human settlement development programme for the reconstruction and rehabilitation of ill-equipped districts. In addition to these activities, during the period 1998-2001, the Kingdom of Morocco has carried a out pilot project for poverty prevention in urban and suburban areas in three major cities. We expect to extend this project, which was carried out jointly with the United Nations Development Programme, with the technical support of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat), to other cities in the Kingdom. Because of its relevance

and success, the pilot project will be formally presented at a meeting of the Thematic Committee.

Thus the Kingdom of Morocco has clearly demonstrated its willingness to become involved in all poverty-prevention measures and plans of action, as advocated by the United Nations system. In this context, the Kingdom of Morocco is organizing, with the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, the Fourth International Conference on Urban Poverty, to be held in Marrakech from 16 to 19 October 2001.

A national debate on land-use planning has just concluded in Morocco. It was a democratic debate that lasted for one year in which all sectors of Moroccan society participated. The debate ended with the adoption of a draft national charter that confronts the challenges of land planning and urbanization in a forward-looking and consistent way. The first main feature of this charter is the strengthening of regional capacities and the establishment of human settlements within the context of decentralization and good governance. Secondly, the charter deals with the rational management of natural resources and solid and liquid waste, as well as environmental protection — activities for which the Kingdom of Morocco requests enhanced international cooperation, in particular because it will be hosting the World Conference on Climate Change in October 2001 in Marrakech. The third main issue dealt with by the charter is the strengthening of the role of women, civil society and non-governmental organizations through the reform of a range of legislative texts, including those governing associations, the personal status code, and the electoral code, so as to increase the civic involvement of society as a whole.

The Kingdom of Morocco has also committed itself to making good governance an effective tool for managing human settlements and fighting poverty and for preparing it for the requirements of globalization, in particular with a view to the entry into force in 2010 of its free trade agreement with the European Union.

Several new workshops have opened up in this respect. These include the adoption of a new and more transparent text on public tendering; the implementation of the five-year plan for economic and social development for 2000-2004; the preparation of a national land management scheme; the revision of the charter of local communities so as to make elected representatives and citizens more responsible in the management of local affairs; and the revision of the press code, with a view to increasing guarantees of freedom of expression to journalists and ordinary citizens.

I should like to pay tribute to the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat), and in particular to its Executive Director. I should also like to reaffirm Morocco's support for all initiatives that contribute to strengthening the capabilities of that Centre so as to enable it to bolster the efforts of Governments to implement the Habitat Agenda.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency the Honourable Jacob Nkate, Minister of Land, Housing and the Environment of Botswana.

Mr. Nkate (Botswana): I would like, on behalf of the delegation of Botswana, and on my own behalf, to express my pleasure at participating in this session on Istanbul+5. My delegation is happy to associate itself with the congratulations already extended to the President and members of his team. I am confident that with his immense experience and under his good stewardship, our deliberations will be fruitful.

The implementation of the Habitat Agenda is one of the greatest challenges of the twenty-first century, especially in view of the fact that the world is faced with ever-increasing rates of urbanization and poverty, a lack of adequate shelter and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The major challenge is to devise ways and means of bettering living conditions in our human settlements in order to improve the quality of life of our people. The Government of the Republic of Botswana is fully committed to the implementation of the Habitat Agenda. This commitment is demonstrated by the fact that we have incorporated projects related to the Habitat Agenda into our National Development Plan 8, which continues until the year 2003. In this regard, we have carried out a number of projects contained in our National Plan of Action and National Habitat Report. The projects relate to the main issues of shelter, social development, environmental management, economic development, governance and international cooperation.

Two of the most noteworthy accomplishments of Botswana, intended to improve the shelter and human settlement situation in the country, were the adoption of the National Settlement Policy in August 1998 and of the National Policy on Housing in December 1999. The National Policy on Housing contains a number of

projects which are now at various stages of implementation. In formulating this policy, the Government realized that it could not continue to be the sole provider of housing, and we therefore recognized the importance of actively forging partnerships with other stakeholders. The Government now emphasizes facilitation as its major role, while other stakeholders, including the private sector, are becoming involved in the servicing and development of land.

Another new aspect of the policy is the promotion of housing as an instrument for economic empowerment for poor citizens. The very poor families who do not qualify for existing government assistance programmes will now benefit from the Poverty Alleviation and Housing Programme, which is currently undergoing a pilot phase. The objective of this programme is not only to provide such families with basic skills to build their own houses but also to equip them with basic business management skills, create employment and generate income to improve their living standards. The pilot programme is already showing positive signs at its early stage of implementation.

Further, the new National Policy on Housing will extend the Self-Help Housing Programme into the rural areas. This programme has in the past benefited the low-income households in the township areas only.

The National Settlement Policy to which I referred earlier aims at promoting sustainable settlements through the provision of services and infrastructure to the various levels of settlements. The policy recognizes the symbiotic relationship between urban and rural settlements and advocates the promotion of their functional linkages. Issues of employment and job creation are also addressed by the policy. Currently, there are ongoing projects aimed at the implementation of the National Settlement Policy which include the preparation of district settlement strategies and settlement development plans to guide investment and the orderly development of settlements. Future priorities for sustainable human settlement development include the continuous monitoring and assessment of progress made on the implementation of the National Settlement Policy, with a view to identifying the needs for new policy directions. Furthermore, efforts are being made to develop housing and urban indicators as well as settlement profiles for different levels of settlements. This will assist in assessing the impact of different urban development initiatives and informed decision-making.

The Government is also committed to the provision of equal access to land and security of tenure. Botswana has three categories of land — namely, tribal, State and freehold land — in order to meet the different needs of the people of Botswana. Each and every person is free to hold land under any of the three categories. It is important to note that tribal land constitutes 71 per cent of the land in Botswana, and it responds to the needs of the majority of the people. The land under this category is easily accessible to all income groups as it is allocated at no cost to applicants. State land plots are sold at cost-recovery prices, and the Government has introduced direct subsidies to make these plots accessible to low-income households.

The question of gender equality is topical internationally and is one of the issues being addressed in Botswana. To this end, all gender-biased laws are at various stages of revision. A study commissioned by the Government to look at various policy documents on gender and development is a clear example of the Government's intention to design national development programmes that are gender-sensitive. A strategy commonly referred to as the National Gender Programmes (NGP) was launched in 1998. The NGP is a comprehensive statement of the vision, objectives, strategies and actions which Botswana aspires to achieve in the 20 years following NGP's launching.

Environment management is one of Botswana's top priorities. Measures are being taken to, inter alia, reduce pollution of all kinds and ensure the implementation of local environmental plans.

The above endeavours are being carried out within an environment of good governance characterized by the gradual decentralization of some central-Government functions to local authorities and the strengthening of these authorities, so as to enable them to carry out their mandate. Some of the functions include implementation of the district housing programme and physical development planning by District Councils. In spite of the efforts made by the Government in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda, there is still a need to build more partnerships with the private sector and the international community, especially in the area of technical assistance. This will go a long way in reducing

implementation problems associated with the critical shortage of skilled manpower Botswana is now facing.

In conclusion, we reaffirm our commitment to the full implementation of the Habitat Agenda and urge all concerned to play an active and effective role.

Finally, on behalf of the Government of the Republic of Botswana, I am pleased to pledge annually for the next five years the sum of 75,000 pula — which currently translates to approximately $14,000 — to the Habitat Foundation.

The Acting President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Slaheddine Belaid, Minister of Equipment and Housing of Tunisia.

Mr. Belaid (Tunisia) (*spoke in Arabic*): On behalf of Tunisia and its President, His Excellency Mr. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, I am pleased to express our pride at the holding of this twenty-fifth special session of the General Assembly to conduct a comprehensive review and appraisal of the implementation of the Agenda of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), adopted in Istanbul in June 1996 and aimed at further consolidating the foundations of comprehensive development and well-being for all peoples and at enabling present generations to safeguard the essential and necessary components of a decent life for future generations.

Tunisia has taken part in all the regional and international events that paved the way for this special session. Our sizeable delegation includes experts and Habitat Agenda partners from our Parliament, local authorities, the private sector and associations. We came to New York with a national report that was developed and enthusiastically implemented by all the national actors, including government bodies, non-governmental organizations and individual experts. Based on objective and detailed indicators, the report shows that Tunisia has endeavoured to set up the legal framework and the institutions required for methodical planning for urban development, growing urbanization and the organized utilization of the national territory, as well as to involve municipalities, regional bodies and local bodies in improving the management of human settlements. The goal of these endeavours is to keep abreast of Tunisia's growing urbanization rate, which was 61 per cent in 1994 and 62.8 per cent in 2000.

Tunisia has addressed this phenomenon by taking a number of measures aimed at developing the land, increasing the supply of low-cost plots, providing appropriate mechanisms for careful urban planning and paving the way for urban expansion, on the basis of a master plan to develop the national territory and master plans for developing cities while taking into account the need to preserve fertile farmland. These are mechanisms for implementing one of the themes of the United Nations Conference — "sustainable human settlements development in an urbanizing world".

As outlined in our report, Tunisia was able to develop and implement specific national strategies aimed at promoting fairness and equality. These strategies entail the participation of the citizen and are without gender-based discrimination. They have allowed us to register significant progress, as the number of housing units exceeded the number of households by 13 per cent in 1999, and the percentage of people owning the housing units in which they live has risen as high as 78.2 per cent. In addition, most of our urban settlements and houses are provided with basic services. The access of these settlements and houses to the power grid rose significantly, from 86 per cent in 1994 to 94.6 per cent in 1999. Access to drinkable water was nearly 75.2 per cent in 1999, and access of housing units to the sanitation network in urban communities reached 67.7 per cent during the same period.

We share the view of the international community that the sustainable balanced development of cities and urban communities can be achieved only through programmes aimed at eradicating poverty, assisting low-income groups and striving to improve the living conditions of all citizens in rural areas. We note that in Tunisia the poverty rate has declined sharply — from 6.2 per cent in 1995 to 4.2 per cent in 2000.

To this end, in his October 1999 Agenda for the future, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali decided to eradicate by 2004 all remaining dilapidated houses; these account for 1.2 per cent of the overall housing stock. Thus, Tunisia will have succeeded in attaining the first goal set by this Conference — namely, adequate shelter for all.

We hope that the debate on assessing the implementation of the Habitat Agenda will result in unified concepts and a deeper understanding of the link between an international strategy and various national

strategies. The correlation between the issues posed by increasing urbanization, within the context of rapid globalization of the economy, and the need to meet the requirements of citizens, has in most cases conferred upon it an international character; hence, the Tunisian President's initiative calling for a world solidarity fund, the basic function of which would be to provide the international community with a mechanism to eradicate poverty and to promote the world's least favoured regions, which would be funded through donations and voluntary contributions. This call was founded on the President's personal conviction that it is no longer possible to imagine a balanced or safe world or countries without decent living conditions for all. The initiative is also based on a successful national experience that was started in 1993, providing for the establishment of a national solidarity fund to be set up within a very short period of time, not exceeding seven years. It allowed for the mobilization of 550 million Tunisian dinars benefiting more than 1,450 remote and deprived areas in which more than 200,000 households lived and now benefit from basic services such as roads, drinking water, electricity, as well as income generation, employment and incorporation within the nation's comprehensive development cycle. At the Urban 21 Global Conference held in Berlin in early July 2000, we highlighted the effectiveness of such tools in anchoring the rural population to their original areas and in limiting rural to urban migration. This experience can be expanded to many other countries worldwide. The interest in the projects of the National Solidarity Fund manifested by visitors to Tunisia from friendly and sisterly nations and their wish to benefit from this pioneer programme has encouraged President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to decide to make Tunisia's experience available to the international community in its efforts to advance humankind and to raise living standards.

Tunisia wishes to hail all those who have contributed to the organization of this important international event and calls on the international community, including Governments, organizations and associations, to show increased solidarity and mutual assistance. Tunisia reaffirms its constant readiness to take part in all international, regional, and bilateral efforts aimed at the implementation of human rights slogans for decent living conditions.

The Acting President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. László Miklós, Minister of the Environment of Slovakia.

Mr. Miklós (Slovakia): First of all, Mr. President, I wish to congratulate you on your election as President of the twenty-fifth special session of the General Assembly to review and appraise the implementation of the Habitat Agenda. Slovakia associates itself with the statement made by the representative of Sweden on behalf of the European Union. Nonetheless, I would also like to make a statement at the national level.

Slovakia's main features as concerns housing issues are similar to those of other Central European countries with economies in transition since 1989. These are as follows: the increasing share of private ownership of dwellings; the increased social segregation of inhabitants; conflicts between the social and economic situation and market prices of dwellings; problems with social dwellings, in particular for the Roma population and unemployed persons; the increasing rate of an aged population; and a low birth r. .e. To solve this situation, the Slovak Government is considering housing as its priority programme for the period 1998 to 2002. Last year this effort resulted in stopping the decrease in housing construction and in doubling the number of completed dwellings compared to that of 1995.

Recommendations of the country profile, elaborated with the assistance of Habitat and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, are helping us to create a sound regulations and subsidy system to address the aforementioned problems. The legislation and regulatory framework for housing is already comparable with that of the European Union. The reform of public administration in Slovakia this year will shift a lot of housing and planning responsibilities to self-government at the regional and local levels. All of this indicates that we are on the right track.

The main specific features influencing the sustainable development of settlements in Slovakia are framed by its location at the very centre of Europe, in the Carpathian mountains, where the main European watershed between the Baltic, North and Black Seas runs. This is the reason for the following developments: big regional development differences -- for example, the Bratislava region achieves about 70 per cent of the average development level of the

European Union; a big share of small settlements — that is, 88 per cent of all settlements have fewer than 2,000 inhabitants, and most of them are spread around remote regions with low population density; a large extent of nature conservation, water and forest protection areas with high biodiversity values, since 41 per cent of Slovakia is forested; and heavy mountain terrain, passes and narrow valleys create environmental and development problems linked with international transport.

Therefore, solving major environmental and development problems, such as sewage systems, water supply and waste management, are very costly and not cost-effective when considered in the usual economic manner. Priority problems do not appear as a function of the number of inhabitants, as usually assessed, so we certainly cannot consider per capita costs as the main criterion for environmental and development investments.

We encourage Governments and international organizations to take into account the country-specific relations between settlement structure, natural and landscape conditions and environmental problems when defining their priorities for investment in sustainable development, in particular when considering the priorities for different assistance and funding schemes.

We in Slovakia are also proud of some of our achievements in the area of settlements, in particular our special planning system.

The Act on physical planning, amended and adopted by the Slovak Parliament in July 2000, has been to a large extent adapted to include the ecological dimension. Under the Act, physical planning is considered to be the major complex horizontal integrating tool for sustainable development, environmental preservation and for the protection of nature and natural resources. It incorporates ecological landscape planning and ecological networks into each planning level, and it constitutes the framework for sectoral plans.

All of this is fully in accordance with chapter 10 of Agenda 21 — which we have already forgotten about a little bit — and with the Habitat Agenda. As a result, we would like to make another recommendation on behalf of the four Visegrad countries: that Governments and international organizations strengthen the position of physical/spatial planning as the major horizontal tool for sustainable development and environmental care, and help to increase the acceptance of physical/spatial planning by other sectors as an integrated framework for spatial organization and development.

All of this is especially important in economies in transition, where increased foreign investment requires more space and more land. Therefore the spatial coordination of sectoral policies is of crucial importance for sustainable development.

In implementation of the Habitat Agenda as well as the National Action Plan, cooperation with neighbouring countries, especially with the Visegrad group, European Union countries and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, is indispensable.

This special session is an opportunity for the international community to assess the work done and to express our political will to continue our efforts to further promote the goals of Habitat II: to ensure adequate shelter for all and sustainable development of human settlements.

The Acting President: I should like to remind representatives of the time limit set for interventions at our special session, which is five minutes.

I now give the floor to Mr. Im Chhun Lim, Minister of Territorial Organization, Urbanization and Construction of Cambodia.

Mr. Im Chhun Lim (Cambodia) (*spoke in French*): On behalf of the Royal Government of Cambodia, I have the honour to report to the Assembly on the current housing situation in Cambodia and on the progress made in this area in the spirit of the Istanbul summit, held five years ago.

Cambodia is, above all, a rural country. Less than 15 per cent of population lives in urban areas. However, bearing in mind the annual population growth rate of 2.49 per cent, there is a strong chance that the capital and other urban areas will experience an influx of people from rural areas in the next 10 years. Given this trend, and to avert the risk of an uncontrolled rural exodus, the Royal Government is stressing rural development and the economic development of secondary towns through investment in infrastructure.

Currently there are tens of thousands of squatter families in Phnom Penh, and thousands more in other urban centres. These urban poor are living in deplorable conditions, with very low incomes and inadequate housing and public services. The municipality of Phnom Penh, thanks to a fund set up by the Royal Government and with the technical and financial assistance of the international community, has undertaken a pilot project for the development of poor urban communities and has been able to secure adequate housing for more than 1,000 squatter families.

The problem of housing and human settlement is both a rural and an urban problem. Poverty limits the ability of many Cambodians to improve their living conditions. In rural areas, housing is generally very simple but adequate. The problems relate more to drinking water, flood control, health care and security of land ownership. The lack of physical infrastructure is also an obstacle to new human settlements, and consequently, in terms of the sustainability of human settlements, it is closely linked to the ability to overcome these difficulties.

The Royal Government has already set up a poverty-reduction strategy that is based on a multisectoral development strategy. Its goal is to increase the incomes of people in both rural and urban areas by promoting macroeconomic stability, facilitating the development of the private sector, improving the physical infrastructure, promoting the development of agriculture, enhancing the management of water resources, advancing rural development and promoting good governance.

The management of natural resources focuses on the management of water-related resources in areas such as the provision of drinking water, irrigation and flood prevention. The Government is working on a water policy, which, according to the plan to supply rural areas with water, should give, by the end of the year 2005, a larger percentage of the population access to water that is suitable for consumption — that is, 40 per cent of the rural population versus 29 per cent today.

The new land law, to be adopted by the National Assembly in the coming weeks, and an improved system of land registration will strengthen occupants' security of land tenure.

In order to strengthen partnership — especially local partnership — the Government has promoted several projects aimed at functional decentralization, which involve a decentralized and participatory system of management. Village development committees, composed mainly of women, have been set up in more than 30 per cent of villages and are focusing their attention on the participation and strengthened capacity of men and women, thanks to vocational training, the development of basic community services, food security of households and the creation of employment through entrepreneurial programmes in rural areas. The use of demined land for settlements, achieved through a process of participatory planning, is another example of a decentralizing initiative.

We should also underline the fact that Cambodia is endowed with a very active civil society and a substantial non-governmental organization sector, consisting of more than 800 registered organizations, both national and international. This sector may in the future contribute to a more dynamic partnership, with a view to bringing about an improvement in the area of human settlements.

On the basis of these experiences, Cambodia will be holding local elections on 3 February 2002, when 1,621 districts throughout the country will elect their first decentralized local council.

Concerning international cooperation, I should like to underline those international cooperation projects that aim specifically at settlement in urban areas, including the projects undertaken by the municipality of Phnom Penh for the development of poor urban communities, which are supported by the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, the United Nations Development Programme and Great Britain's Department for International Development. These projects are already bearing fruit, as they are making a considerable contribution to the implementation of the Government's social policy, thereby improving the human rights situation.

I would like to take this opportunity to express our deep gratitude for the technical and financial assistance we have received in this area, and to express the hope that other sources of funding will be forthcoming from the international community to enable us to put through the Habitat Agenda as it was decided on by the General Assembly of the United Nations.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Mohammed Bin Ibrahim Al-Jarallah, Minister of Municipal and Rural Affairs of Saudi Arabia.

Mr. Al-Jarallah (Saudi Arabia) (*spoke in Arabic*): I have the honour to convey the greetings of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Fahd Bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and to extend his best wishes for the success of this conference in reaching positive results that will contribute to continuous progress in the development efforts of all nations.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been and continues to be among the most active countries in all activities of the United Nations and its organizations. This is due to its strong belief in the importance of the United Nations and the role of its organization in unifying world efforts to improve the living standards of all mankind and to stabilize human societies. Due to its commitment, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will continue unhesitatingly its efforts to participate in and support the United Nations and its organizations in achieving their objectives.

In 1996, the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) was held in Istanbul. The Istanbul Declaration and the Habitat Agenda global plan of action summarized the great achievements of that conference. The Declaration, along with the Habitat Agenda, provided the main guidelines and future directions for a global plan of action and efforts to be undertaken by all countries to ensure adequate shelter for all and to improve living environments in human settlements. The Habitat Agenda global plan of action incorporates a wide range of policies to be adopted by Member States for the alleviation of poverty, protection of the environment, improving the efficiency and effectiveness of future human settlement planning, and supporting all international efforts in related activities.

Today, five years after the Istanbul Declaration and the Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat), we need to again assess progress on the international, regional and national levels.

Allow me to present the most important achievements that the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has realized during the last five years, in accordance with the principles of the Istanbul Declaration, within four main broad areas.

The first concerns the formulation of strategies and plans for promoting sustainable development in human settlements and accelerating the integration between urban and rural areas. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is among the countries that introduced at an early stage the practice of formulating strategies and plans for sustainable development of human settlements. This policy has achieved its objectives of promoting orderly urban settlements and upgrading services in both urban and rural areas.

More recently, it became clear that there is a need for a long-term national spatial development strategy. This strategy was envisioned as a general framework for long-term guidance of human settlement development on the national level. Its objectives are to promote a more spatially balanced population distribution and supporting economic activities and services within the national space without hampering economic efficiency in the use of resources, while reducing rural-to-urban migration and the concentration of population in large cities, and eliminating, as much as possible, interregional disparities in development levels between the Kingdom's provinces.

In formulating this strategy, the main considerations included the necessity to promote sustainable development, protect the environment and promote more equitable distribution of development opportunities and accessibility to services by all citizens in rural and urban areas. This is in addition to enhancing the efficient utilization of natural and human resources in all regions. As we are all aware, these issues are consistent with those addressed by the Istanbul Declaration and the Habitat II global plan of action.

At present, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is in the process of executing the policies incorporated in this strategy through government and non-governmental organizations. In addition, efforts are currently under way to formulate regional development strategies that are considered to be among the most essential tools in executing the national spatial development strategy.

In its continuous efforts to improve the living environment in human settlements, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is in the process of formulating and endorsing a comprehensive strategy for sewage treatment and disposal as well as for solid waste

recycling. It includes policies and action-oriented programmes to develop this vital sector.

During the last five years, efforts of the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to improve the living conditions of all citizens have been substantial and continue to accelerate quickly. Towards this objective, the Government's development programmes continue to put great emphasis on the provision of adequate and modern services and utilities to all settlements, urban and rural.

In addition, the Government continues its policies of providing the necessary support to stimulate the participatory role of the private sector in promoting sustainable development of human settlements. This support includes but is not limited to the provision of loans and grants on easy terms for investment purposes. Moreover, the Government continues to accord its utmost care and attention to those who are in need and to vulnerable groups. During the last five years, the Government allocated 36 billion Saudi riyals to citizens in the form of loans and grants for specific activities.

The second area of achievement involves enhancing the role of the private sector so that it may become a more active partner in realizing national developmental goals, in general, and in human settlements development, in particular. The Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has a pioneering role in supporting the private sector. Since the early 1970s, it has been pursuing policies intended to broaden and enhance the role of the private sector.

During the last five years, the Government has continued to provide a conducive environment for the private sector to flourish through direct and indirect financial support so that it can play a more effective role in all aspects of establishing productive activities and providing services. Also during the last five years, the Government has given the private sector a new initiative to enhance public-private participation through the establishment of supreme councils, new commissions, authorities and organizations. These include, but are not limited to, the creation of the Supreme Economic Council with a mandate to draw up essential investment policies and to expedite decisions with respect to essential investment projects. A general organization for the promotion of investment was also established. Its main role is to support national and international private sector initiatives to invest in productive new projects and service-oriented activities and to ensure that their investments are economically sound.

In addition, to diversify the economic base of provinces and to promote the utilization of resources within the context of private sector initiatives, the Government has established a High Commission for Tourism. Its mandate is to establish a long-term plan and policies for the development of tourism and to act as a coordinator between different agencies involved in tourism activities. It is thus expected that tourism will become one of the vital productive sectors of the national economy.

Moreover, new laws were issued to promote and encourage foreign capital investment, including a law to allow and organize the ownership of real estate by foreigners.

These are among the examples of actions taken by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia during the last five years.

The third area of achievement lies in the cooperation and commitments of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia regarding international agreements and United Nations activities.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was among the countries that signed the Charter of the United Nations. Since then the Kingdom has spared no effort to support all international agreements that aim at the well-being of all mankind. The Government has endorsed most of the United Nations agreements, including, during the last five years, agreements relevant to our meeting, such as those on women's rights and the Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements, its purposes and principles, commitments and global plan of action.

The fourth area concerns the role of the Government in assisting special groups of society. The provision of social services to all segments of Saudi society has been central to the Kingdom's overall development strategy. Towards this end, the Government considers that provision of social services is an integral part of comprehensive development and that it contributes to national progress. This is mainly because investment in social services helps in the alleviation of poverty, the realization of peace and justice, social cohesion among different segments of the society, increase in productivity, and creation of

productive job opportunities, and it heightens public participation in all activities of society.

The Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in full partnership with the private sector, is committed to the creation of gainful and productive job opportunities to all citizens so as to ensure that all have adequate income to support a reasonable living standard. In addition, to ensure that no one is left behind, the Government provides financial support and assistance, occupational training and shelter to those who are in special need and to vulnerable groups such as citizens with physical or mental handicaps and those who are deprived due to social circumstances beyond their control. In addition, the Government provides income assistance and social help to the poor and needy. Moreover, the General Organization for Social Security and the Government Retirement Fund are responsible for providing pension and social security payments to retirees from the public and private sector.

The Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia also provides special opportunities for youth to develop their personal abilities in a secure environment that encourages them to become good citizens and active participants in their societies.

With respect to women, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia supports and protects women's rights that ensure dignity and promote women's interests according to the principles of Islamic Shariah. The Government continues to allocate needed funds for the expansion of educational institutions for women and to create a safe, equitable and comprehensive educational environment that helps women excel in their educational achievements. At present, Saudi women are actively participating in the labour force and hold jobs in the private and public sectors. Saudi women and men are jointly participating in the development of human settlements.

The fifth area involves international cooperation and assistance to developing countries and disaster areas. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been and continues to be among the pioneering countries in extending helping hands and assistance to many countries, either directly or through international and regional organizations and institutions. At present, the Kingdom's assistance to countries in need amounts to 5 per cent of its national domestic product. This percentage is considered among the highest provided by all countries in the world community.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia expresses unlimited support to basic issues relevant to international cooperation and continues to participate in and contribute to most international activities. Its programme of financial assistance and grants to more than 70 countries represents a model of international cooperation and partnership.

There is no doubt that what the Palestinian people are suffering in the way of persecution, destruction, murder and terrorizing of the innocent on the part of the occupying Israelis is directly in opposition to the principles of the United Nations and the rules of international law, not to mention the objectives and spirit of Habitat II.

Thus, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia calls upon all States Members of the United Nations, especially the influential members of the Security Council, to meet their obligation to put an end to Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people and to enable that people to attain its legitimate rights and establish an independent State on its own territory, with Jerusalem as its capital.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia supports the principles, objectives and high values set out in the Habitat Agenda and those to be endorsed at this special session, with the exception of those that run counter to the principles of Islamic law and the legislation of our Kingdom. It hopes that the work of this special session will meet with the greatest success.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Abreha Asfeha, Minister of Public Works of Eritrea.

Mr. Asfeha (Eritrea): It is an honour for me to address the twenty-fifth special session of the General Assembly on behalf of the State of Eritrea. Five years after Istanbul, we are meeting here in New York to review and appraise the implementation of the Habitat Agenda and to renew our commitment to further action and further initiatives to deal with old and new situations.

While my country cannot claim the successful implementation of the twin goals of the Istanbul Declaration and the Habitat Agenda, owing to the limited resources at its disposal, considerable efforts are being made to address some of the fundamental issues that are regarded as vital to meeting housing demands and ensuring sustainable human settlements.

To mention but some of these, the land proclamation of 1994 and security of tenure are two important legal measures that have fundamentally changed access to land use and ownership of property in Eritrea.

One of the first important steps in urban housing policy is to take legal and administrative measures to resolve problems related to security of tenure once and for all. The second piece of legislation pertains to the land proclamation, which will presumably be difficult to implement, but which is widely believed to promote growth by making land available for business and residential purposes. But more important, legislative measures have been introduced to ensure unhindered and equitable access to land and property by women, irrespective of their marital status.

The latter reform, which is enshrined in the constitution of the State of Eritrea, is central to the empowerment of women for the sustainable development of the country. These legislative measures and others, including our labour laws, have been introduced on the basis of non-discrimination and are aimed primarily at ensuring uniform geographic development while closing the social and economic gaps relating to gender, age group, social status and disability.

Lately, my Government, in partnership with the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat), has been able to launch a low-cost housing development programme by involving the low-income community and enabling it to participate in the construction of their own shelter using local materials. So that such programmes may expand and be sustainable, my Government is attempting to create a conducive environment that will promote active participation by the private sector and all other stakeholders, especially by residents, which can be instrumental in combating and alleviating poverty.

To narrow the gap in access to social services between rural and urban centres, my Government has been actively engaged in the construction of physical and social infrastructures even in the remotest areas of the country. That modest but important step towards responding adequately to the need for housing and other social services is taking place against the backdrop of the legacy of occupation, conflict and invasion that have had an adverse impact on the development of the country. The border conflict between my country and Ethiopia over the past three years, which has affected about 1.6 million people, has created various categories of victims: internally displaced persons, voluntary refugee returnees, and expellees, with each group demanding a specific response to its needs.

Moreover, the interplay between war and drought in certain regions of the country is pushing the social safety net and government resources to their limit. In that regard, my delegation is particularly grateful for the inclusion of vulnerable groups such as internally displaced persons and refugees in the present draft declaration, which I believe will be adopted by the Assembly.

Mr. Vohidov (Uzbekistan), Vice-President, took the Chair.

Let me share our experience with regard to the importance of urban governance, a topic that is addressed in the report of the Executive Director of Habitat, to which my Government fully subscribes. The principles and goals of improved urban governance are aimed at creating a close relationship between decision-making bodies and the executing local authorities. While Eritrea has adopted decentralization as a policy and has put administrative structures in place, the lack of strong institutional and financial bases is hampering the transfer of administrative capability to local bodies. The strengthening of the institutional framework is therefore vital for the attainment of improved urban governance.

I wish to make some preliminary remarks about the concept of partnership with local authorities. For that concept to be successful, the participation of the private sector and non-governmental organizations, including through the twinning of cities, should be carried out with full cooperation and coordination between the donor community and the central authority.

Let me seize this moment to renew my Government's strong political commitment to the full implementation of the draft declaration of Istanbul+5.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Guntis Pukitis, State Secretary of the Environment and Regional Development Ministry of Latvia.

Mr. Pukitis (Latvia): First of all I would like to express my country's gratitude to the United Nations

Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat), to the Government of the United States of America and to everybody in this Hall who has made this special session possible.

By way of introduction, I would like to stress that Latvia truly appreciates the extensive efforts and the contributions of all its counterparts in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda. Latvia has made remarkable progress in its transition to a market economy and democracy. Since 1996, stable growth of the economy has been achieved. For instance, last year's gross domestic product growth was 6.6 per cent. Improvement of the legal framework, central and local management and economics has been a consistent priority for the Latvian Government. Alongside this, non-governmental organizations have become stronger, and have an ever-increasing influence on processes of social importance. Priorities set by the Latvian plan of action for Habitat II — the development of a network of inhabited localities, the provision of opportunities for inhabitants to get suitable settlements and the activation of new construction — are being implemented gradually.

Reforms of the housing sector in Latvia were commenced in the 1990s and are being carried out at present in the areas of the privatization process, the restitution of property and the activation of the housing market. The ownership structure of the housing fund has changed significantly. In 1993, about 54 per cent of housing was owned by the State and municipalities and only 46 per cent was private property. In 1999, private property had reached 70 per cent, but public property represented just 30 per cent. At the end of the privatization process, approximately 80 per cent of Latvian housing will be private property and municipalities will maintain only 20 per cent of the housing as rental or social housing.

Municipalities are providing assistance to poor people or people with low incomes through the rental of social apartments and subsidies for services and rent. At the same time, I have to mention that, in 1999, only 4 per cent of all construction work constituted the construction of housing and the greatest bulk of this was financed by inhabitants themselves. There is still space for improvement in the fields of tax advantages and allowances related to housing investment.

The housing crediting programme adopted in June 2000 by the Cabinet of Ministers is an important milestone in the promotion of the mortgage system. The main goals of the programme are the promotion of the development of the housing market, thus giving inhabitants the opportunity to obtain affordable and suitable housing; the activation of the construction industry, thus promoting the growth of the country's economy; the development of the mortgage lending system; and a new instrument of financial market mortgage bonds.

Relevant improvements in different fields of environmental protection in Latvia have been achieved in recent years. More than 55 water supply and sewage system improvement projects have been launched since 1996. Latvian legislation on air pollution has been synchronized with the relevant European Union requirements as well. Waste management is one of the priorities at both the municipal and State levels. In 1998, Latvia adopted a long-term strategy on waste management up to the year 2010.

Since June 1996, Latvia has signed a large number of international agreements on housing, social development, poverty reduction and environmental management. Multilateral programmes initiated by the United Nations, the European Union and the Nordic Council are being carried out at present. The World Bank, the European Investment Bank and other international financial institutions are providing assistance for my country in related matters.

In conclusion, let me express a sincere belief that only through an integrated approach to our human settlement issues at the international, national and local levels we will be able to resolve them and reach our goals.

The Acting President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Erich Stather, Vice-Minister, Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Mr. Stather (Germany) (*spoke in French*): Since the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) was held in Istanbul in 1996, the subject of the development of viable human settlements has gained importance in Germany. This is borne out, inter alia, by almost 1,700 communal decisions that have been taken concerning the local implementation of Agenda 21. They reflect a new culture of communication between the administration, the municipal council, citizens, professional associations, trade, industry, initiatives, churches and many others. A widespread belief has evolved that the viable

development of cities is a key element of comprehensive sustainable development, which has become a leitmotiv and political programme since the 1992 Rio Conference.

Cities are an important key to sustainable development, which is why I am particularly pleased that the German delegation includes not only representatives of the Federation and the states, but also a large group of men and women who are mayors and representatives of civil society.

The German country report on the implementation of the Habitat Agenda was discussed last February in the final deliberations of the national committee. The report documents German progress in implementing the decisions taken at Rio and Istanbul. In this context, the national urban planning policy is designed to develop the European city by making it, without any structural disruption, a viable city in a viable urban region.

In Germany, we have largely succeeded in guaranteeing adequate housing to large low-income families, immigrants and the elderly and in continually improving their living conditions. Overall, Germany today enjoys a well-balanced and functioning housing market. The right to housing has been secured in Germany.

In order to address the danger of social tension and polarization in the cities, the current programme to promote urban planning has been supplemented by the "social city" programme. In 2001, the Federation has spent a total of DM850 million to promote the renovation and development of towns, which allows the promotion of urban planning significantly to stimulate not only urban development, but also structural, employment and economic changes.

Germany also contributes to the development of viable human settlements through bilateral development cooperation. At the global level, we support 242 community and urban development projects through our contribution of more than €650 million. German development cooperation supports the participation of non-governmental organizations, including in the private sector, and of organizations of civil society. Communal development cooperation is also playing an important role in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda. German cities are increasingly becoming the twins of cities in the developing world.

The development of viable human settlements is primarily the task of each community and country. The international community, however, must act with joint responsibility and commit itself to ensuring the future of the world. New forms of international cooperation are necessary. The United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) in Nairobi is playing a lead role in this political process. I am very pleased to note the outstanding job being done by Ms. Anna Tibaijuka, in her capacity as Executive Director of the Centre, in raising the Centre's profile in order that it may play this important role. I also wish explicitly to thank Mr. Klaus Töpfer, who, as the former Executive Director, laid the all-important groundwork.

The Global Conference on the Urban Future, Urban 21, gave us an opportunity to discuss the major problems of cities. More than 4,000 representatives from the worlds of politics, society, economics and sciences came to Berlin in July 2000 to do so. In his opening statement, the Secretary-General of the United Nations emphasized the particular importance of cities to sustainable development in the twenty-first century. The final declaration of Urban 21 is a clear profession of faith favouring autonomous communal administration and urban management. The results of Urban 21 are recognized in the report submitted at this special session of the General Assembly.

In December 1999, Germany was host to the inauguration of the Cities Alliance, a joint project of the World Bank and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements. The Cities Alliance is a promising multilateral initiative, geared towards the exchange of experience, ideas and strategies, and it contributes to improving the efficiency and impact of the implementation of the Habitat Agenda. Germany supports the initiative with a contribution of $1 million.

The first successful steps to implement the Habitat Agenda at the global level have been taken, as pointed out in the report submitted by the Executive Director. It clearly states the main problems and necessary priorities for solving problems.

Urbanization will continue in the twenty-first century. At the same time, we can see that poverty is increasingly becoming a major urban problem. One and a half billion people live on less than $1 per day, and the majority of them live in urban areas. That is why two challenges must be the focus of this special session of the General Assembly.

First, it is important to strengthen cities as engines of economic development and as places of social integration. Cities must not continue to be the cauldron of the culture of poverty. To the contrary, they must become the ideal framework for overcoming poverty. "Cities without slums" is one of the main international goals of development decided by the Millennium Assembly. If the world becomes, as expected, increasingly urban, where, if not in the cities, would we want to reach our goal of reducing poverty by half by 2015? The programme of action to combat poverty adopted by the federal Government of Germany in April 2001 also envisaged greater support for the rehabilitation of slums and the fight against poverty in cities and towns.

Secondly, we must direct urban development towards a path that is compatible with environmental demands. Cities, with their patterns of production and consumption, must be evaluated to ascertain if they offer their inhabitants healthy living conditions, if their use of natural resources is sustainable and if they contribute to protecting the climate.

Finally, I wish to thank the preparatory committee for its good preparatory work for this special session of the General Assembly. The draft declaration before us is a good basis for concluding this special session of the General Assembly successfully and with a clear political message. We need a clear consensus on the political priorities that will help us implement the international objectives of development.

The Acting President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Karel Havlíček, Deputy Minister for Regional Development of the Czech Republic.

Mr. Havlíček (Czech Republic): My delegation fully shares the views expressed yesterday by the Minister of Sweden on behalf of the European Union. The Czech Republic aligned itself with that statement, and this allows me to confine my statement to a brief characterization of current processes in my country and to a few comments on the Habitat II follow-up.

In the five years that have elapsed since the Istanbul Conference, the Czech Republic has continued the process of substantial changes in the sphere of housing and human settlements. One of the recent milestones in this process has been the adoption of a strategic document known as the Housing Policy Concept in 1999. It traces past developments in the housing sector, identifies main challenges, underlying objectives and prerequisites for their attainment. Some of the goals have already been achieved, including the establishment of the State Housing Development Fund.

These years have also seen major public administration reform in the Czech Republic, including the establishment of 14 new regions with elected representation. Administrative powers are being gradually transferred to these newly created territorial units.

At the Millennium Summit, the heads of the States made a commitment for whose fulfilment we also feel responsible. The commitment says that by the year 2020 a significant improvement is to be achieved in the lives of at least 100 million slum-dwellers, as proposed in the "Cities without slums" initiative. The fulfilment of that commitment will verify Habitat's capability to participate in resolving such a comprehensive issue. Like many other delegations, we feel strongly that the Habitat Agenda should not be renegotiated while the implementation mechanisms remain to be strengthened. Our efforts should therefore be concentrated on the agreed framework of priorities within the Agenda to make it useful and manageable in terms of implementation for all countries.

We will also maintain our interest in assisting in establishing, promoting and supporting municipal and regional networks of a pool of common and easy-to-measure indicators applicable for national reporting. However, this will call for modifications of the existing indicators.

In the course of implementing the Habitat Agenda, it is almost impossible to overstate the importance of regional, national and local approaches. For our region, Europe, let me mention the ministerial meeting held last September in Geneva within the framework of the sixty-first session of the Committee on Human Settlements of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. That meeting adopted a strategy for a sustainable quality of life in human settlements in the twenty-first century. As does Ms. Anna Tibaijuka, Executive Director of Habitat, we see this document and the ministerial declaration that was adopted as good starting points for the future focus of the work of the Committee, as well as an important step for the future implementation of the Habitat Agenda in the region of the Economic Commission for Europe and its contribution to the global process.

We are well aware that the goals set by the Habitat Agenda may accelerate the housing policy reforms enacted by many countries and, at the same time, intensify regional and worldwide cooperation. The Czech Republic, too, is working hard in a bid to gradually achieve those goals. We will also support the efforts to implement those goals by continuing our voluntary annual contributions for the activities of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements in Nairobi.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Oleksandr Shlapak, Vice-Minister for Economy of Ukraine.

Mr. Shlapak (Ukraine) (*spoke in Russian*): It is a great honour for me to speak, on behalf of Ukraine, at this special session of the General Assembly on the review and appraisal of progress made in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda. I should like to take this opportunity first of all to thank all those who took part in the preparatory process for the session for their work and to the secretariat of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) for its substantive report and practical recommendations.

Given the broad range and multifaceted nature of the issues raised here, I would like just to touch upon a few aspects that our delegation believes deserve particular attention. Ukraine's report to the twenty-fifth special session contains detailed information about our national experience of human settlements, and that document is available at the side of the Hall. We are making a difficult transition to a market economy and all of our economic relationships are changing radically. In this context, Ukraine is adopting decisive measures to deal with the housing situation in an attempt to find a comprehensive solution to those problems. The President and the Government of Ukraine are committed to fulfilling the obligations undertaken in Istanbul, with the involvement of local self-government, the private sector and non-governmental organizations in achieving the goals set forth in the Habitat Agenda.

Over the past few years, important legislation has been adopted and standards set in this area. We attach particular significance to the concept of sustainable human settlements development, which provides a national plan of action to deal with the crisis of cities and promote their economic growth, create an adequate living environment, address housing problems and overcome poverty and unemployment.

In 2000, a general land-planning scheme was developed, which includes a national strategy and State priorities for the rational use of State-owned land, keeping in mind social and economic features, environmental constraints, resource potential and regional differences.

Housing financing and construction is being promoted, using a mix of owner and State funds, as is the provision of housing to socially vulnerable groups. A State fund has been established to assist young people in building houses. We are ensuring that citizens can exercise the right to obtain plots of land, free of charge and as their private property, on which they can build houses and agricultura' structures. The housing and communal services sector is being reformed, the quality of services is being improved and their cost reduced; subsidies are being provided for the socially vulnerable citizens. Special attention is being paid to the protection of Ukraine's cultural heritage, including its monuments and the historic sections of its towns and cities.

The last decade of the previous century and the beginning of the new millennium have been characterized by the accelerated process of globalization, which is having a significant effect on the development of human settlements. Globalization brings with it challenges and risks — degradation in the demographic situation in cities and other settled areas, an increase in crime and unemployment, overpopulation in cities and the associated housing and ecological problems, poverty, and the negative effects of natural and manmade disasters. The importance of these problems for countries with transitional economies was reaffirmed yesterday by the Secretary-General. It would be appropriate for future work on the Habitat Agenda to pay particular attention to the specifics of these processes in various regions and countries. It is important that the urbanization of the world does not lead to further marginalization.

Ukraine welcomes the increased activities on the part of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements and the strengthening of its coordinating functions. We would like to draw attention to the proposal of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Committee on Human Settlements, in the framework of the implementation of the draft

declaration on cities and other human settlements in the new millennium, to support countries with economies in transition by helping them to decentralize management of their urban and rural human settlements and attracting the resources of financial institutions and the United Nations, national and international funds, the private sector and other partners.

The Executive Director of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements has pointed out that urbanization is a global process that requires adequate global measures. We are convinced that the special session, and the declaration that it adopts, will provide a powerful impetus for the further development of international cooperation in solving the fundamental problem of providing adequate living conditions for all in the coming millennium.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Mohammed Al-Taloa, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Public Works and Urban Development of Yemen.

Mr. Al-Taloa (Yemen) (*spoke in Arabic*): It is a great honour for me to participate, on behalf of the Republic of Yemen, in this special session of the General Assembly devoted to a comprehensive review and appraisal of the implementation of progress made since the conclusion of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II). I would like to congratulate the President of the Assembly and members of the Bureau for convening this special session.

It has become clear over the past five years, after the achievements of the Istanbul Conference, that issues relating to habitat are among the main challenges facing the international community in the twenty-first century and the new millennium. Thus it is important to formulate a global policy to implement the Habitat Agenda in a manner that can effect real change in the lives of people in urban and rural areas throughout the world.

The population of the world has reached 6 billion, half of whom live on less than $2 a day. Most of those who live in abject poverty are in the countries of Asia and Africa. Many such people live below the poverty level on the outskirts of cities and in slums. In developing countries slum-dwellers represent a third of the urban population. They are deprived of basic services, lack security and communication with domestic and international communities and are exposed to environmental pollution.

In this context, my delegation, as part of seeking solutions to put an end to this worrisome phenomenon, supports the cooperation of the World Bank and the United Nations system in their joint efforts to confront this challenge through establishing a global partnership between cities and development partners based on what was decided in December 1999 through the ambitious plan of action that goes by the name "Cities without slums".

The other half of the population of the world lives in rural settlements and in the countries of Asia and Africa. They represent the majority of the population. Most of them live outside the bounds of comprehensive urban planning and lack all forms of social and health-care services. In order to improve their daily lives, we must mobilize the will of the international community to implement ideas and programmes aimed at establishing social, economic and environmental connection between rural and urban areas. International cooperation in these fields is a matter of the greatest importance. We must encourage the establishment of partnerships between the private and public sectors in a manner that safeguards a comprehensive approach to eradicating poverty and to promoting the sustainable development of human settlements.

The Republic of Yemen has made great efforts to bring about sustainable and comprehensive development. Because of the required large investments in infrastructure — particularly in the social service sector and also in the economic sector — human settlement issues are occupying a good deal of the attention of the Government of Yemen. The Government is making extensive efforts to solve the problems facing the population and to meet the various requirements in rural and urban areas. Special efforts have been made on issues of social cohesion and on subsidies for the deprived and vulnerable segments of the society — this through a strategy and general implementation plan that includes the establishment of a social safety net and organizing and planning land use, as well as other projects. We are trying to solidify our commitment to the exercise of democratic freedoms and the protection of human rights. In order to give women the rights they have been ensured under the Constitution, a female Minister of Human Rights has been appointed for the first time in a unified Yemen. Many areas in the political, economic and

social spheres of the Republic of Yemen have been opened to the active participation of women. Last year the local government act was passed. Its goal is decentralization. People in different administrative districts have exercised the rights guaranteed them under the Constitution to elect representatives in different parts and provinces of the Republic.

We would like to remind the international community at this very important forum of the constraints that the Republic of Yemen is facing due to the flow of refugees from some neighbouring African countries as a result of internal conflicts. This flow has been going on for a long time and our country is working actively to find solutions to these conflicts. The flow of refugees has led to problems in the areas of housing and social services and health care for these refugees. We appeal to the international community for an increase in assistance from all the relevant branches of the United Nations system and from donor States.

As the international community continues its extensive efforts to implement the Habitat Agenda to improve living standards in human settlements and environmental conservation and to establish security, justice and equality among the world's peoples, Israeli occupation forces are forcibly attacking Palestinian cities and demolishing the houses of civilians. Land confiscation and the building of Israeli settlements on Palestinian soil still continues despite the two Security Council resolutions 446 (1979) and 465 (1980), which affirmed the illegality of establishing settlement policies. At the moment the report of the Mitchell Committee has called for a freeze on the building of settlements.

Therefore the Republic of Yemen calls on the international community to recognize the importance of maintaining the legal and demographic character of Palestinian land and of preserving its natural resources and the cultural and historic characteristics of the areas under Israeli occupation. We affirm the illegality of forcibly removing people from lands under Israeli occupation. Such action contravenes international humanitarian law. None of these acts contribute to the finding of just solutions to the Palestinian question and Middle East peace to which we all aspire.

In conclusion, we hope that the work of this United Nations special session on Habitat will be fully successful in helping to realize the desired objectives and in improving the living conditions of our populations, the protection of the environment, the eradication of poverty and the maintenance of international peace and security.

The Acting President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Jargalsaikhany Enkhsaikhan, Chairman of the delegation of Mongolia.

Mr. Enkhsaikhan (Mongolia): As has been mentioned by some previous speakers in this debate, about 3 billion people — that is, half of the population of the world — live in urban areas today, and the urban-based economies are now contributing substantially to the gross domestic product of most countries. Rapid urbanization, the concentration of the urban population in large cities and the rapid growth of megacities are among the most significant trends in human settlements.

The concentration of population in urban areas has its positive and negative aspects. Although cities are engines of growth and crossroads of ideas — places of great intellectual ferment and innovation — these same cities can also be places of exploitation, disease, violent crime, unemployment and extreme poverty. In addition, in many countries the situation is further aggravated by political and economic instability, as well as by natural disasters which result in large numbers of people becoming displaced and forced to live in inadequate shelters.

That is why the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, held five years ago in Istanbul, concluded that, with proper guidance, the process of urbanization could promote development. Therefore, I believe that this special session to review the Habitat Agenda should not only focus on actions taken at the local and international levels during the past five years; it should also address the ways and means of generating the new and additional financial resources needed to implement its provisions. In this regard, my delegation attaches great importance to the preparation and holding of the International Conference on Financing for Development to be held next year in Mexico.

As is seen from the report and this debate, many countries, including my own, have made progress towards fulfilling their commitments with respect to the Habitat Agenda. However, it is also quite evident that there is a need to further develop cooperation at the local, national and international levels and to strengthen and make more effective the United Nations

Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) as the focal point for the implementation of the Agenda. In this regard, I would like to underline that the question of providing adequate and predictable funding for Habitat is one of the pressing issues of revitalizing, reforming and strengthening the Centre.

When drawing up further measures, we should bear in mind that the population growth expected in the near future will be mainly in urban areas, and most of it will be in the world's poorest countries.

Allow me now to turn briefly to the situation in my own country, Mongolia. Today about 60 per cent of the country's population live in urban areas. With democracy and open markets, our society is developing rapidly. Today one of the side-effects of the reforms is the widening gap between rural and urban areas, between people with the skills and the knowledge to grasp opportunity and those who lack them. While urban poverty is mostly characterized by low income as a result of production decline, increased unemployment and inflation, rural poverty is prevalent among cattle-breeders who lack access to productive assets, including livestock. Poverty is also related to an underdeveloped infrastructure, lack of market-relations skills and limited access to markets.

Poverty in Mongolia is magnified by the harsh climate. On average, a third of the household or institutional budget is spent just on heating and shelter so as to survive the cold or to stay warm. Thus, nearly 20 per cent of Mongolia's population of 2.4 million were directly affected by a natural disaster, the "dzud", over the last two years in a row. Many people were forced to migrate to the capital, where every third person is already living. As a result, the number of homeless is growing.

My delegation shares the view that future investments should be directed at the cost-effective development of infrastructure and services, especially for such landlocked countries as Mongolia, with its vast territory and small population. The Millennium Road Project, which was launched a few months ago in Mongolia, will promote the socio-economic development of the country by linking all of its five economic regions and by enabling the rural population to have more access to transportation and services. As a result, large settlements would be established along existing and new roads, as well as other infrastructural facilities.

It is rightly pointed out in the report that good governance is essential to addressing the challenges of urban poverty and environmental degradation and to making use of the opportunities offered by globalization. In this connection, I would like to inform the Assembly that the Government of Mongolia is implementing the Good Governance for Human Security Policy Programme, which covers all issues pertaining to human security.

Finally, we believe that this special session provides us with an opportunity to review our achievements, identify the challenges that lie ahead and develop forward-looking strategies for realizing the twin goals: adequate shelter for all, and sustainable human settlements development in our urbanizing world. Let us make the best use of this opportunity.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Sergio Vento, Chairman of the delegation of Italy.

Mr. Vento (Italy): Italy fully supports the statement made by Sweden in its capacity as President of the European Union.

Italy was a strong supporter of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements in Istanbul (Habitat II) in 1996, when it held the European Union Presidency. Our support for the Habitat Agenda remains undiminished today, as we meet five years later to review the implementation of its objectives. Our ongoing support is most clearly manifested by the large delegation sent here by the Foreign Ministry's Department for Development Cooperation, including its Deputy Director General, as well as many representatives of the Ministry of Public Works, civil society and local authorities. Indeed, our 1948 Constitution already embraces the goals of sustainable urban development in its reference to the right "to enjoy the cultural heritage and the landscape".

The structure of Italy in both topographical and administrative terms is a model of decentralization. This feature makes it an excellent test case for the innovative measures that the Habitat Agenda prescribes to tackle the problems of rapid urbanization. Traditionally, the majority of the Italian population has lived in cities and towns. Our urban population is concentrated in a network of vibrant small and medium-sized centres. This arrangement gives rise to a strong social and economic system that provides for a relatively high standard of living, taking into

consideration, of course, long-standing regional disparities.

Among the matters that Italian municipalities are entitled to deal with autonomously, under the leadership of democratically elected mayors, are several that pertain to local development, particularly the development of the territory. This means that urban and local sustainability policies tend to be drafted at the local level. This decentralized system is what enabled Italy to find solutions to one of the great historic issues: the need for housing and basic services in the post-war period.

In order to promote transparent, responsible, accountable, just, effective and efficient governance of towns and cities, more complex policies based on an integrated rather than a sectoral approach should be implemented at various levels. In the 1990s, Italy experienced deep economic and demographic changes, which included a freeze in our population growth, a birth rate below the European average and a growing percentage of elderly persons. On the plus side, there was a rise in the general standard of living. However, like several other industrialized countries, there has not been a corresponding decrease in the number of people living in poverty.

These demographic and economic trends are reflected in patterns of urban change, since cities tend to change through renewal and revitalization, rather than through expansion. Our historic centres have already been extensively restored, and new developments are primarily in brownfield sites. In the five years since the Istanbul Conference, there has been greater support for programmes to revitalize peripheral areas and rich experience in the area of urban regeneration policies. This is producing more liveable areas in our cities.

Access to affordable housing is one of the chief issues addressed by our legislation. During the last few years, there has been a sharp increase in the number of immigrant workers — the rate is now 2.2 per cent of the total population — and the traditional local wardens of housing policy have been hard put to handle this unexpected structural phenomenon. In fact, approximately 40 per cent of immigrants live in precarious accommodations.

The picture for the environment is mixed. Despite some emissions reductions, not all the changes hoped for in consumption and production patterns have become a reality. Petrol consumption has doubled in 10 years, and the percentage of private cars on urban roadways has increased by one third. Upgrading of our extensive rail system, including freight, is moving too slowly. The consumption of potable water is expected to grow consistently, although in a few areas there are still periodic water shortages, and there is still room to improve the necessary filtration facilities.

Finally, Italy has experienced several hydro-geological disasters — possibly due to climate change — which have led to a greater awareness of the insufficiency of a strictly local approach to development and of the need for more efficient coordination with national policies.

Let me not neglect some of our major accomplishments: for the first time, we achieved the goal of preserving at least 10 per cent of the national territory through the establishment of natural parks and reserves. Recent actions have sought to harmonize the goals of sustainability, local development and urban renewal. In the spirit of the Habitat Agenda, such programmes are aimed at enhancing the capacity of local communities to cope with future challenges through investments in structural improvements or human development. In this light, investing in the empowerment of women, children, and the elderly does not represent a social cost, but rather, a contribution to the overall quality of life.

There are limits on the progress that can be made through strictly local action. For example, poverty, immigration and environmental hazards are global challenges that should be addressed through cooperative efforts between every level of Government, from local administrations to international institutions.

As for international cooperation, Italy would like to confirm its commitment to increasing the percentage of our budget that is dedicated to programmes that implement the Habitat Agenda. Our renewed development cooperation policy gives priority to poverty eradication programmes that seek to provide basic infrastructures and access to safe drinking water, create new urban services, upgrade informal settlements and stimulate capacity- and institution-building.

Our development cooperation policies are tending more and more to follow the empowerment and enablement strategies recommended by the Habitat

Agenda. In concrete terms, this means giving more importance to activities that support local organizations in the definition of their urban strategies through capacity- and institution-building initiatives.

Some of our most recent programmes address the preservation and revitalization of our cultural heritage, particularly in connection with areas of poverty. In 1999 Florence hosted a World Bank Conference — "Culture Counts" — whose focus was that the loss of culture and identity has damaging effects, both natural and man-made, whose toll is ultimately much higher than the short-term costs.

The goals of adequate shelter for all and sustainable human settlement development are crucial both to economic, social and cultural development and to environmental protection. That is why we support the Habitat Agenda actions to promote peace and justice and to prevent natural and man-made disasters. In this light, we stress the importance of strengthening coordination within the United Nations system, and we recognize the specific, reinforced role of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements. To this end, I am pleased to announce that just yesterday the Italian authorities approved a substantial increase in our voluntary contribution to the Centre.

The Acting President: I give the floor to Mr. Yashar Aliyev, Acting Chairman of the delegation of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Mr. Aliyev (Azerbaijan): Today the world is at a crucial stage of its development. The ongoing process of globalization is accompanied by the increasing pace of urbanization. For the first time in the history of humanity, the larger portion of the world's population will be living in cities. Meanwhile, there are about 100 million homeless and 1 billion people living in substandard conditions. Unfortunately, these figures are increasing.

Obviously, the main responsibility for addressing the challenges of urbanization rests with national Governments. At the same time, without significant technical, financial and other kinds of assistance from the developed countries and the relevant international institutions, the developing countries and economies in transition will not be in a position to deal effectively with the emerging large-scale problems caused by urbanization.

The creation of appropriate living conditions for the population is a priority task for the Government of my country. It is implementing vigorously the Istanbul Agenda and is doing its best to engage representatives of the private sector, non-governmental organizations and other actors of civil society in this process. In its implementation of the Habitat Agenda, my Government is conducting democratic and economic reforms, carrying out measures to eradicate poverty, and rendering support to low-income families and other vulnerable social groups.

Unfortunately, the processes of democratization and economic reform in Azerbaijan are hampered by the ongoing military aggression by the Republic of Armenia against my country, which has resulted in the occupation of 20 per cent of the territory of Azerbaijan. For more than 10 years, the Nakhichevan region of Azerbaijan has been blockaded by Armenia.

Armenia's aggression has led to the destruction of centuries-old cities and settlements. In the occupied territories, more than 900 cities and towns, some 600 schools, 250 medical institutions, and all museums and historical and cultural monuments have been destroyed. About 1 million Azerbaijanis — or one in eight citizens of the country — have lost their homes. This is the ninth year in which they have been living in tents, in unbearable conditions.

After the Istanbul Conference, the Government of Azerbaijan established the Agency for Rehabilitation and Reconstruction of the Liberated Territories, which carries out its activities in accordance with the guidelines of the Habitat Agenda. Since 1997 the Agency has restored 2,145 houses and infrastructure facilities in four administrative regions of Azerbaijan liberated from occupation.

The adoption of the law on the basics of town planning in the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1999 has laid the necessary legal foundation for activities in this area. New, up-to-date environmental laws have also been adopted, namely, on environmental protection, environmental security, sanitary and epidemiological safety, and other areas. With the adoption of the law on the status of municipalities in 1999, the process of decentralization and transfer of power from the central Government to the local authorities has begun.

It goes without saying that a fundamental prerequisite for the successful implementation of national programmes of action and of the Habitat

Agenda is comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the world. Armed conflicts, State terrorism, foreign aggression and occupation, which have disastrous consequences for human settlements, should not be only opposed by each and every State, but must be decisively suppressed by the international community.

The implementation of the Habitat Agenda is an integral part of the poverty eradication process and of sustainable development. Our delegation is certain that the Declaration on cities and other human settlements in the new millennium, which we are about to adopt, will contribute to the sustainable development of cities, and work in this field will be actively pursued at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, to be held in Johannesburg next year.

In conclusion, I would like to express our delegation's confidence that the concerted efforts by all countries to implement the Habitat Agenda will allow us to cope with the challenges of the new millennium and to create a stable and safe common home on our planet.

The Acting President: I give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Aksoltan Ataeva, Chairperson of the delegation of Turkmenistan.

Mrs. Ataeva (Turkmenistan) (*spoke in Russian*): Let me congratulate Mr. Holkeri on his election to the presidency of this special session to review and evaluate Habitat II, and may I express my belief that his experience and skill will greatly contribute to the success of this important event.

Only 10 years ago, newly independent States appeared on the map of the world upon the ruins of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Each one of them has chosen its own path to development and is striving to create a way of life in accordance with its national values and ideals. This was internationally recognized by the United Nations declaration of the year 2001 as the Year of Dialogue among Civilizations.

The consequences of urbanization are different for each particular country, and Turkmenistan, following up on Habitat II, has identified the policy of improvement of housing in the cities as a priority.

We came to independence with high rates of mortality and disease and a low level of health care. While we had vast natural resources, we did not have industrial infrastructure, and we were in a state of complete food dependency. Housing problems were acute.

Turkmenistan's process of sustainable development started with the creation of a sound legal system and the protection of citizens' rights and liberties secured in our Constitution. Turkmenistan's commitments in this connection were set out in its special declaration on the international commitments of neutral Turkmenistan in the sphere of human rights and in many legislative acts.

The dynamic development of the economy has made it possible to make changes in all spheres of life. New branches of industry were created — textile, oil and gas, food — and this has allowed us to provide food security for our people and to strengthen the energy capacity of the country.

The protection of the interests of the people is the focus for the President of Turkmenistan, who has adopted special programmes for these purposes. In accordance with the strategy for socio-economic change in Turkmenistan for the period until 2010, 46 per cent of the national budget will be devoted to social needs. Education and medical care are provided free of charge. Thanks to the measures initiated by the head of State, the people of Turkmenistan enjoy many benefits. They receive free gas, water, electricity and salt; there is a low, fixed price for flour; and nominal amounts are charged for public utility services. This huge social support for the population has safeguarded our country against social upheavals during this transition period and has ensured a stable development of the economy. There is intensive development of human settlements; high-quality residential housing is being built, as well as social and cultural complexes; water, gas, electricity, road and highway facilities are being reconstructed or newly built; and trees and gardens are being planted in areas where conditions are extremely hot and dry. The full gasification of the country was completed, and this allows the population to use ecologically clean fuel for everyday activities.

A study of the standard of living conducted by the Government of Turkmenistan in cooperation with an American research institute demonstrated a high level of housing. Of people living in rural settlements, 97 per cent have separate flats or houses; in the cities the figure is 96 per cent. This has been made possible by the housing legislation, the provision of State loans for construction of housing, transferring land,

attracting investments and giving extensive rights to local self-governing bodies.

An enormously positive role has been played by the United Nations Development Programme, with whose assistance a joint programme on the development of public utilities in Turkmenistan has been established.

Among our population, 98 per cent have education, and studies note that the level of education is directly proportional to the level of income and the economic status of households. The gross national product in 2000 grew at a world record rate of 17.6 per cent.

Thanks to the sustainable development of the country, the creation of new employment opportunities and the development of private businesses, the level of unemployment is low, especially in rural areas.

More than half of Turkmenistan's population is made up of women, and in this connection gender policy that ensures their participation in socio-economic processes has a direct influence on the life of the population, which is extremely important. Among women, 98 per cent have education, while among those 41.4 per cent have higher education, and 26 per cent of the members of the Turkmenistan Parliament are women.

Improvements in the demographic situation in the country, in particular the increase in life expectancy, the decrease in mortality for women and children and the increase in working-age population, were made possible by steady economic growth and social and inter-ethnic stability. In this regard, the assistance of the United Nations and its specialized agencies is invaluable.

Our goal is to make Turkmenistan a flourishing country. To achieve this goal we are open to international cooperation, and we again confirm our devotion to the principles set forth in the Habitat Agenda.

The Acting President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Stefan Tafrov, Chairman of the delegation of Bulgaria.

Mr. Tafrov (Bulgaria) (*spoke in French*): We have come a long way since Vancouver and the first United Nations Conference on Human Settlements. The world has changed greatly even during the five years since the 1996 Conference, and the twenty-fifth special session gives us a unique opportunity to seek original and effective solutions, to redefine a strategic initiative and to devise a policy of human settlements capable of remedying the scourges of exclusion, poverty and environmental degradation in cities and villages alike. We must act immediately to respond to the hopes of the people of the world, as well as to their needs and aspirations at the beginning of the third millennium.

The Commission's report sheds light on questions of concern that this session must examine, and it defines clearly the framework for our discussion. Bulgaria welcomes the visionary draft declaration on cities and other human settlements, which follows in the steps of the Millennium Declaration and the Istanbul Habitat Agenda. Bulgaria regards the strengthening of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) as a crucial element for the implementation of the Habitat Agenda. More attention should be paid to better coordination among the Centre for Human Settlements and other United Nations bodies — the United Nations Environment Programme, the World Bank, the Economic and Social Council — and other partners; the power of their synergy could give a new impetus to the implementation of sustainable development policies.

A global and integrated approach is needed in this new era of globalization and interdependence. Today, all countries, both developed and developing, be they in the North, South, East or West, face similar problems in the field of human settlements. A spirit of cooperation and a common plan are imperative for finding an approach of solidarity that will bring suitable solutions.

In order to carry out the task entrusted to it, this special session must pay particular attention to the problems of poverty, marginalized and vulnerable groups, rural areas and urban misery. Whereas all countries and their peoples encounter the same problems, in many developing countries, especially in rural areas, and for the unemployed, the homeless and slum-dwellers, the situation is particularly desperate.

One particular aspect of this problem that I would like to stress is the exclusion of women, young people and children. We must work more decisively to forge policies and take urgent measures to guarantee full and equal participation for women and young people in the

planning of human settlements and in decision-making in this sphere.

Let me share my profound satisfaction at the participation — both in this session and throughout the preparatory process — of our partners: local authorities, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and women's and young people's groups. Civil society has already made its voice heard on the approach to the problems of human settlements and in identifying solutions to those problems.

Bulgaria is convinced that this session must declare that a priority for action is good urban governance at all levels. Public authorities, which bear primary responsibility for the implementation of the Habitat Agenda, must create a climate of cooperation among all partners and must encourage their participation in the search for solutions that will make our cities safer, more workable, healthier and fairer. I am pleased to note the support of many Governments for the establishment of mechanisms for consultation and partnership among the parties concerned. Here, the best-practices initiative can promote true exchanges of information and can enable us to learn from one another. An important element of political, institutional and legislative reform is decentralization; it deserves special attention. Decentralization is the first step towards good governance. But decentralization must always go hand in hand with adequate funding.

The Bulgarian delegation understands the need to devote more attention to environmental degradation. New initiatives translated into concrete action and tangible results must be taken to address the urgent, critical challenges in this sphere.

Since the Istanbul summit, the Republic of Bulgaria has been formulating its own national policy and has been working on international cooperation in line with factors related to the specific needs of its economy in transition and to what it sees as essential concerns for its future and that of the region. We have reformulated our national strategy with an awareness of the critical challenges of transforming our economic and social structures to those of a market economy. We have adopted a number of measures, including political, institutional and legislative reforms. We have defined the main lines of a new human-settlements vision: housing, social development, the eradication of poverty, economic development, good governance and regional cooperation. Government activities and programmes related to human settlements have been integrated into our macroeconomic, social and environmental policies.

In the field of housing, the accent has been placed on the preservation of historic sites and of our cultural heritage and on the renovation and modernization of urban sites. Programmes and activities to reform the property-registration system and to improve the registration and administration of real estate are under way, and there are plans to address the question of financing for housing. The Government is promoting measures to support vulnerable individuals, and, in the sphere of environmental management, efforts are being made to regulate and rationally manage resources.

Turning to the question of regional cooperation, I want to highlight the role of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, adopted by the Council of Europe in 1985. This has become a model for legislation on local self-government for many countries in transition.

There is no doubt that this special session has given rise to great hope that the international community will unite on an operational habitat programme, including specific and effective commitments. Given that hope, and on behalf of the more than 6 million inhabitants of our planet, we must renew our commitments, shoulder our responsibilities, and mobilize our determination and political will to translate the measures we adopt into action.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Anund Priyay Neewoor, Chairman of the delegation of Mauritius.

Mr. Neewoor (Mauritius): It is a great pleasure for me to address the General Assembly at its twenty-fifth special session, devoted to the overall review and appraisal of the implementation of the outcome of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlement (Habitat II). Five years have passed since we met in Istanbul to adopt the Istanbul Declaration and the Habitat Agenda. The time is now most appropriate for us to critically assess how successful we have been in the implementation of our decisions and to take stock of the problems we have encountered. The outcome of our deliberations at this session will certainly serve as an important input for the preparation of the World Summit for Sustainable Development to be held in September 2002 at Johannesburg, South Africa.

My delegation fully supports the provisions of the report of the Executive Director of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) and the recommendations contained therein. We strongly commend Habitat for its efforts to be consistent with the overall goals of the United Nations to alleviate poverty and to promote sustainable development. We also wish to express our appreciation to the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements for its relentless efforts in monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the Habitat Agenda using a variety of tools.

We believe that both the Istanbul Declaration and the Habitat Agenda remain as valid today as they were five years ago. It is therefore opportune for us to reaffirm our will and commitment to continue with their implementation.

Our assessment of the implementation of the Istanbul Declaration and the Habitat Agenda is that it has been far from satisfactory. In spite of the articulate and defining presentation of the various issues, implementation has lagged behind. It is to this that we must give serious thought. A number of reasons may be advanced for this; however, we believe that the complexity of the Istanbul Declaration and the Habitat Agenda could have been a major factor. Several national Governments have not been able to undertake the diverse tasks necessary for implementation due to lack of resources.

We all know too well that providing a dwelling to citizens is never an end in itself. In fact, it is the beginning of the urbanization process, a process which cannot be complete without the provision of such essentials as electrification, water supply systems, road infrastructure, waste management and the construction of schools and many other public facilities. These in turn call for substantial investments which, unfortunately, in developing countries, have to come from extremely scarce resources.

Urbanization all over the world is associated with a plethora of problems. Environmental degradation and the challenges of generating sufficient employment, providing adequate housing and meeting the basic needs of the citizens are major issues confronted by urban planners. People living in urban areas expect their national Government to overcome these challenges with a view to fulfilling their legitimate needs for a decent living. Once again, Governments are faced with the problem of inadequate financial resources in meeting the challenges of urbanization.

In Mauritius, there is a growing demand for land for residential purposes. As we are a small island State with limited land area, this growing demand can be met only by releasing land which is being used for agriculture, a major economic activity in the country. One can therefore understand how difficult it is for the Government to strike the proper balance to meet the demand for land for housing without drastically affecting the national revenue from agriculture.

My delegation fully shares the view that local authorities play an important role in the administration of cities. They also have a crucial part to play in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda. Local Governments are the closest development partners of the citizens. In Mauritius, the national and local Governments have evolved a synergy to carry out development activities.

It is the objective of our Government to provide a decent dwelling to every Mauritian family. The Government continues to lay emphasis on social housing and on giving special assistance to families with low incomes that are making efforts towards finding a shelter for themselves. In order to cater to the different economic strata of society in Mauritius, the Government has established a low-cost housing scheme for the low-income group. Additionally, the Government offers incentives, such as grants and loans with low interest rates, to help citizens in the construction of their houses.

The contribution of the private sector to the implementation of the Habitat Agenda cannot be underscored enough. The cooperation between Government and the private sector is of particular importance in addressing the problem of urbanization and its attendant difficulties. The private sector in Mauritius is actively helping in vertical construction, as well as in facilitating the provision of basic infrastructure and urban services.

This session provides us with the opportunity to reiterate our political will and commitment to the implementation of the Habitat Agenda with the close cooperation of all actors involved. It is our hope that this renewed commitment will contribute to a better world with a decent dwelling for everyone.

Finally, my delegation would like to express its support for the declaration to be adopted at the end of this session.

The Acting President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Fotios-Jean Xydas, Chairman of the delegation of Greece.

Mr. Xydas (Greece): Let me begin by adding my delegation's and my personal congratulations to the President of the General Assembly and his colleagues in the Bureau on their respective elections. I am convinced that, given his proven skills and able leadership, this session will be brought to a successful conclusion.

Allow me also to associate my country's position with the statement made by the Presidency of the European Union.

Five years after Habitat II, we have come together again to reconfirm our political will to accomplish the two main goals of the Habitat Agenda. The implementation of the Habitat Agenda is a major challenge for my country and its adoption coincides with a period of dynamic changes in Greece at all levels, which are related to both external and internal factors. The problems we face in our human settlements are of a particular and complicated nature. We should not ignore, for example, that every part of Greek territory bears a many centuries-old cultural heritage which should be preserved and protected.

We in Greece are daily faced with such difficult dilemmas, particularly when development has to take place. It is a fact that important and positive steps have been taken in the past five years concerning all aspects of quality of life in both urban and rural areas. All these and many of the difficulties we face, as well as our future priorities, are contained in our national report prepared for this special session of the General Assembly.

In the housing sector, where, traditionally, the country greatly depends on private initiatives, action of the public sector — Government, local authorities and so on — is based on the provision of tax relief and benefits, interest-rate subsidies for first-time home-buyers and the programmes of the Workers Housing Organization. Our efforts are being intensified to meet the housing needs and social integration of vulnerable social groups, such as repatriated ethnic Greeks from countries of the former Soviet Union, as well as the Roma.

Particular efforts are being made to cope with frequent natural disasters, such as earthquakes and floods. These efforts relate both to the rehabilitation of the people affected and the establishment of methods and means to reduce the degree of vulnerability of constructions and the developed environment of human settlements. Furthermore, Greece faces a new challenge from the influx of a considerable number of political and economic refugees. Efforts in this area aim at guaranteeing all necessary means for their social integration, among which housing is a priority. Lastly, special efforts are being made towards improving housing quality in terms of energy performance, structural adequacy, basic infrastructure and community services.

Of particular importance is the balanced development of the national human settlements system, which is characterized by a wide variety of structures, problems and options. This has led to the upgrading and appropriate adjustment of planning and design mechanisms and approaches to address the diversity of human settlements at all levels of national territory, especially in mountainous, rural, island and coastal areas. The completion of the major transportation and communication network that is under way, as well as the national cadastre, are expected to contribute significantly to the balanced development of our settlements.

In the large urban centres and in the medium and small cities, action is focused on the improvement of the quality of the developed environment, mainly through the renewal of deteriorated urban areas, the restoration and reuse of abandoned buildings, the improvement of infrastructure, the control of illegal building, the restriction of unjustified urban space expansions and the protection of peri-urban and non-urban areas. The implementation of the construction programme for the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens has already contributed to the radical upgrading of urban infrastructure.

Let me add that Greece strongly believes that policies for the development of rural areas and the improvement of the quality of life in our villages contribute substantially to the full and balanced sustainable development of the whole country. We realize that the implementation of the Habitat Agenda

requires collective efforts and coordination of the actions of stakeholders involved in all sectors of human activities and at all levels of governance. We place particular emphasis on the crucial role of local authorities. Good governance at the local level, which promotes comprehensive approaches, participatory processes and transparency, constitutes the driving force towards sustainable human settlements development. Within this framework, the recent reorganization of municipalities and communes into larger administrative entities, combined with the decentralization of decision-making and the transfer of financial resources, constitutes a major achievement for our country.

Let me add a note concerning the history of Habitat. I am referring to the efforts started 40 years ago by distinguished Greek architects and planners in cooperation with other international personalities in various fields. Conscious of the need for the international community to cope with the eventual and unavoidable phenomenon of global urbanization, and of the need for the adoption of a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach to human settlements, those individuals tried to upgrade and expand the initial United Nations programme on housing, building and planning into a holistic concept of human settlements, and to demonstrate the necessity of giving priority to natural environment issues and the quality of the total spectrum of human settlements.

Those efforts led to the Vancouver Conference — Habitat I. In recognition of that contribution, a moment of silence at the plenary was devoted to the memory of the late Professor Doxiadis, the first Greek initiator of this effort, a year after his death.

Let me also remind the Assembly that polis, policy and *politismos* — which is culture — are terms derived from the same root in the Greek language. We understand that Habitat is concerned with bringing together the issues dealt with at the United Nations conferences on the environment, population, food, the status of women, the whole balance of the world economic order, and many others. For it is in settlements that the effects of all these particular issues come together. It is in settlements that mankind achieves happiness, justice and dignity — or suffers rejection, despair and deepening violence.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Ion Botnaru, Chairman of the delegation of the Republic of Moldova.

Mr. Botnaru (Moldova): The five-year process of the implementation of the Habitat Agenda has offered an integrated and balanced approach that encompasses policy and legislative and programme initiatives, towards both the development of human settlements and poverty eradication. Although we have registered some progress in different areas of human settlements, there still remains the challenge of developing and implementing effective strategies and methods to solve acute problems resulting from poverty, urbanization and lack of adequate shelter, including social housing, rapid population growth, economic stagnation and social instability.

The review and appraisal of these obstacles should be conducted at the international, regional and national levels while taking into consideration the commitments of the Habitat Agenda and its critical areas, documenting and learning from the lessons of its implementation, and by preparing recommendations for future action, as indicated in the report of the Executive Director of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements and other action-oriented documents of this session.

My country believes that the best way to achieve sustainable human settlements is to ensure that future initiatives are based on best practices and on the experience gained from the review and appraisal process. The principles that are at the foundation of the Habitat Agenda and the Habitat II platform of action must guide us in our work, as those documents continue to constitute a relevant and important global agenda for development in an urbanizing world. Another basic approach to the development of human settlements that embodies the Habitat Agenda could be partnership and capacity-building in the era of globalization and urbanization.

We are fully aware that the growing globalization of the world economy represents opportunities and challenges for the development process, as well as risks and uncertainties. There is therefore a need to identify problems more clearly and to endeavour to find possible improvements, seeking new perspectives on urbanization and wider participation by various active actors in the area of human settlements, including governmental and non-governmental

organizations. In that context, the Government of the Republic of Moldova reaffirms its commitment to the full implementation of the Habitat Agenda and the final document of this session, as a basis for future action and progress.

By adopting the Habitat Agenda all Governments have agreed to take the steps necessary to ensure that affordable, habitable and accessible housing is provided and that security of tenure is guaranteed. These measures represent the reaffirmation of the right to adequate shelter, that is, a place to live in security, peace and dignity.

During the Istanbul review process, my country has focused on undertaking a whole set of current and long-term measures, on the elaboration of a common policy in this field that provides for the development of normative frameworks, and on the development of national mechanisms to implement the principles of sustainable development, including sustainable human settlements.

The socio-economic reforms in my country are oriented towards a market economy and have led to the establishment of a new concept of urbanism and territory planning. As a result, significant changes have taken place in this sphere during the last five years. Those changes include the decentralization of public administration, the adoption of a new structure of territorial administration, and the consolidation of capacity-building at the local administration level, with a view to optimizing the whole reform process.

Like other countries with economies in transition, we are exerting considerable effort to grapple with fundamental challenges. It is obvious that economic and social problems have been onerous for a certain part of the population, causing a great deficit in the municipal housing sector and threatening the steady development of society. In order to avoid a sharp deterioration in the living standards of the population, a reduction in municipal services, a decline in the efficiency of economic activities and a descent into poverty, we must look for new ways to significantly improve the urban housing sector and municipal infrastructures.

Fully aware of this, the Government of my country, with broad support from civil society and some international agencies, has drawn up a comprehensive national strategy for sustainable development — Moldova 21 — that contains an in-depth analysis of the current situation and identifies the main objectives and orientations for the reform of the whole spectrum of socio-economic activity, including human settlements. The realization of the national cadastral project, which is aimed at creating informational support and the necessary conditions for the development of urban and rural areas, also constitutes an eloquent example of the implementation of the Habitat Agenda. At the same time, our approach in the national strategy programme consists of adopting a well-coordinated set of legislation and implementing governmental policies directed at developing sound housing and sustainable human settlements.

A new dimension in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda in my country is the active involvement of the private sector and small business in the development of human settlements. In this context, we share the view expressed by the Executive Director of the of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements that the fundamental prerequisite for sustained development of human settlements, adequate housing and environmental protection is a consolidated democracy in which there is pluralistic political representation, rule of law and respect for human rights and civil liberties, and which is supported by sound economic and social reforms and effective local administration. Furthermore, we also take into account the importance of international cooperation, especially cooperation with United Nations specialized agencies.

We believe that the implementation of the Habitat Agenda is possible only if the declarations and political appeals are followed by practical steps and if real financial resources are found. As the primary responsibility for full implementation of the Habitat Agenda and of the additional actions and initiatives contained in the outcome documents of the current special session of the General Assembly lies with Governments, I would like to reaffirm the commitment of my Government to promote the development of sustainable human settlements.

The Acting President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Walter Balzan, Chairman of the delegation of Malta.

Mr. Balzan (Malta): The delegation of Malta aligns itself with the statement made earlier by Sweden on behalf of the European Union.

At the outset, may I commend the work carried out by the United Nations Centre for Human

Settlements in channelling the efforts of the international community towards the effective implementation of the Habitat Agenda.

The Government of Malta believes that the provision of adequate shelter for all is of significant importance, since it is conducive to socio-economic progress and sustainable development. This delegation views the Habitat Agenda as the necessary template for efforts made by both national authorities and the international community in their efforts to attain sustainable human settlements development.

As we are fully aware that the very high population density in Malta necessitates very careful land-use planning, a structure plan for land-use management was adopted in the early 1990s, and a planning authority was established to monitor its implementation. Through the active participation of relevant major groups, including local authorities, a number of local plans were subsequently drawn up for the various regions.

Initiatives encouraging home ownership were introduced and eventually were implemented throughout the years with considerable success. In fact, today 70 per cent of homes in Malta are owned by their occupants. Moreover, protection against dispossession from property and the deprivation of rights over property is provided for in the Constitution of Malta.

Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case for large parts of the globe. Too many people still live in poverty and in miserable housing conditions, conditions that slow down economic growth and lead to environmental degradation and, in turn, lead to more poverty. This self-perpetuating problem needs to be addressed in an integrated manner. The achievement of this goal, however, necessitates the adequate support of the international community.

In formulating policies for sustainable development in this field, the human dimension should remain at the centre of the development process. Comprehensive planning policies and strategies should not overlook the economic, social and environmental concerns, as these three pillars of sustainable development are not only interdependent but are mutually supportive. Policies designed along these guidelines would effectively contribute to the reduction of poverty and unemployment and the provision of social services, decent housing, crime prevention and better infrastructure, including electricity and safe drinking water, as well as the integration of women and marginalized groups for an improved social fabric.

Governments have the primary responsibility for ensuring sustainable development in their respective countries and for the implementation of the Habitat Agenda. However, it must be acknowledged that socio-economic progress in the developing countries cannot be achieved without assistance from developed countries through, inter alia, institutional capacity-building, the promotion of best practices and the achievement of adequate levels of official development assistance, as well as debt relief.

Broad public participation, including by women, in decision-making and policy ownership is critical to the successful implementation of the Habitat Agenda. In this respect, the input of local authorities, especially for improved urban governance, cannot be sufficiently underscored. Aware of this, and guided by the principle of subsidiarity, the Government of Malta has extensively amended the Local Councils Act of 1993 with the aim of further strengthening the devolution process.

The further decentralization of community services through the intensification of the one-stop-shopping concept has been high on the Government's agenda. More importantly, local councils, in which residents have a direct bearing on the decision-making process affecting their immediate urban or rural environment, have become an integral and indispensable part of our political system.

This delegation believes that society should provide families with an environment that promotes the potential of the family as the rearing ground of present and future generations. Such a responsible role needs to be complemented by other social institutions and community-based organizations, as well as by the promotion of a high-quality education system that instils life skills rather than merely imparting facts.

This conference presents yet another opportunity to the international community to express its solidarity with those living in poverty and in need of adequate shelter. The problem does not need identification.

The measures required to attain our objectives have been laid down. However, although progress has been achieved, much more needs to be done. Efforts need to be intensified in order to ensure that expressions of solidarity are translated into concrete

action aimed at alleviating the plight of so many millions of human beings.

The Acting President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Hussain Shihab, Chairman of the delegation of Maldives.

Mr. Shihab (Maldives): It gives me great pleasure, Sir, to see you preside over this important special session of the General Assembly. I am confident that with your able leadership and diplomatic skill, you will steer the work of this session to a successful conclusion.

Maldives, being a nation of very small islands, had to face the issues of shelter in its own special way. Due to the fragmented nature of the country, with the population distributed over a large number of small islands, provision of infrastructure to small pockets of population in an effective and sustainable manner required new thinking in planning.

At present a very important policy related to human settlements in the Maldives is a new approach to regional planning. For effective provision of various social and physical infrastructure services, a programme on population concentration has been initiated. People living on islands with very small populations are encouraged to move to selected islands with larger land areas and development potential. In the long term, there will be fewer inhabited islands with better facilities, which will attract economically feasible and sustainable investments in infrastructure.

Although moving the population is a difficult process, the Government of Maldives is able to carry out the population concentration programme by involving the public in the decision-making process. The people involved are convinced of the various benefits of this new approach, and the success rate of implementation is very encouraging.

We believe that this new approach to planning is an important step in implementing the Habitat Agenda in our country. We are confident that this long-term strategy will prove to be one effective way of addressing the problem of adequate housing and other shelter-related issues. Another important planning decision taken by the Government is to address the scarcity of land in the capital island of Malé, the biggest urban centre in the country. The shortage of land has resulted in an acute shortage of housing and land needed for other development needs. An important urban development project near Malé, which started in 1997, will therefore provide reclaimed land for developing a new urban centre, which will address the pressing housing needs of the capital.

Since the shortage of land is one of the main problems facing the country, an effective land law that will address urban development needs is required. It is for this reason that the Government has drafted a new land law which is presently in the process of approval by the Parliament. This new land law will strengthen the law as it relates to issues such as mortgages, strata titling and the buying and selling of land, which will pave way for creating a healthy housing market.

Housing finance is another important aspect of housing policy to which the Government of Maldives has given priority. The Government firmly believes that, in order to find a sustainable solution to the housing problem, it is necessary to develop a proper financing mechanism. At present, loans are taken under commercial loan conditions with short payback periods and high interest rates. The pilot project on housing finance now being carried out will therefore be the first step towards a comprehensive housing finance system.

Maldives is also working on the Urban Observatory Programme, with the support of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat). Through this programme, urban indicators will be continuously updated, thus helping the country to formulate policies that will be more effective in addressing issues of urban development and shelter.

These are some important areas that the Government of Maldives is working on in addressing the Habitat Agenda. While the task ahead is challenging, the Government firmly believes that the present work of creating the proper framework will pay off in the long term, and it is committed to a sustainable human settlements policy.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Kamil Baialinov, Chairman of the delegation of Kyrgyzstan.

Mr. Baialinov (Kyrgyzstan) (*spoke in Russian*): With regard to the sustainable development of human settlements, the Government of Kyrgyzstan is focusing on the interests of the people, because that is what underlies our actions in implementing the Habitat Agenda. Housing difficulties are among the most acute social problems in the Kyrgyz Republic. To resolve

these problems, a housing construction programme covering the period to 2010 has been worked out, and this will be implemented in accordance with the instructions of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic. The main objective of the Republic's housing programme policy is to provide accessible housing to the citizens through the creation of mechanisms to attract both domestic and foreign investment in housing construction, strengthening legislation and the housing market infrastructure and making full use of the capacity of construction enterprises and related manufacturers.

Today, Kyrgyzstan is one of the lowest-ranking industrially developed countries in the provision of housing, and has an average of 12.9 square metres of floor space per person. Furthermore, the housing shortage has worsened in recent years because of the disastrous reduction in the volume of housing construction caused by overall economic decline and an acute reduction in State financing and the income of the population. The number of people in need of housing is growing yearly — the figure now stands at more than 166,000 families — and that increase is linked to a drop in the construction of new residential units in all regions of the Republic and to the difficulties of establishing new mechanisms for financing housing through mortgages and loans.

The delegation of Kyrgyzstan acknowledges that the mobilization of domestic resources and a rational national policy are essential for resolving problems associated with housing and human settlements and that the main responsibility for the implementation of the Habitat Agenda lies with the Government. However, international support is also very important. The serious financial difficulties and the complex nature of the problems involved in housing construction will require a programmatic approach commensurate with the scale of the problem, whose resolution is of great importance for the social and economic development of Kyrgyzstan. We will need to draw on the experience of countries throughout the world and will require international cooperation and assistance from international organizations. Such assistance will be particularly welcome in connection with the forthcoming International Year of Mountains, which is to be celebrated in 2002 within the framework of the United Nations. For Kyrgyzstan, which is a mostly mountainous country, it is particularly important to provide social and economic support for the population in mountainous regions and to ensure that standards of living meet international standards for developed regions.

On behalf of the delegation of the Kyrgyz Republic, I should once again like to reaffirm our desire to implement the Istanbul Declaration and the Habitat Agenda. These documents will continue to serve as the basic starting point for our actions to ensure the sustainable development of human settlements. In this connection, Kyrgyzstan welcomes the new strategic vision of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) and its stress on two Global Campaigns, to guarantee home ownership and to ensure rational urban governance — strategic factors in ensuring international cooperation as it relates to the provision of adequate shelter for all and sustainable human settlements development.

Kyrgyzstan also welcomed the creation of the Advisory Committee of Local Authorities and its contribution to the work of Habitat in preparing for this special session. Kyrgyzstan attaches importance to activities designed to bring countries with transitional economies into a system of multifaceted cooperation in the field of sustainable human settlements development. This can be done by strengthening the support and involvement of the United Nations, financial institutions, international and national funds, the private sector and other partners in the Habitat Agenda.

The Acting President: In accordance with the decision taken at the 1st plenary meeting, I now give the floor to Ms. Narelle Townsend, President of the NGO Committee on Human Settlements.

Ms. Townsend (NGO Committee on Human Settlements): It is a distinct honour to be able to address the Assembly today as President of the NGO Committee on Human Settlements and Co-Coordinator of the International Facilitating Group for NGOs, which was established for Habitat II at Istanbul and was reinstated in Nairobi during the preparatory process. More than 2,500 non-governmental organizations have been accredited to the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat), many of them representing grass-roots organizations. Perhaps more than any of the United Nations conferences of the 1990s, and because of the all-encompassing nature of Habitat issues, we are hearing the people's voices. They are tired of being referred to as the "dollar per

day" workers by pundits of the international aid industry. The conservative estimate of 1.3 billion persons in need of improved shelter should remind us that degraded living environments and enforced homelessness are inexcusable conditions at this stage of our collective human development.

As for the expectations of the Habitat Agenda, we have come a long way from the Vancouver Declaration on Human Settlements and the Vancouver action plan of the first Habitat Conference, in 1976, but the glaring disparities in economic and social opportunities in human settlements mentioned then continue to be persistent issues worldwide.

During Habitat II, many participants acknowledged that living conditions had not improved during the preceding generation for the vast majority of the world's poorer inhabitants and that the expanding slums and squatter settlements were testimony to the pervasive deterioration of environmental and socio-economic conditions. The Conference's deliberations led to the Habitat Agenda, with its recommendations for action under two main themes: affordable housing for all, and sustainable human settlements in an urbanizing world. Non-governmental organization members of this Committee have initiated research projects, have participated in relevant community events and continue to render volunteer technical services towards realizing goals of the Habitat Agenda, especially at the local level.

The aforementioned two themes of Habitat were augmented by two Global Campaigns — the Global Campaign for Secure Tenure and the Global Campaign on Urban Governance. The NGO Committee is preparing a compendium of cases of secure tenure from examples worldwide as our contribution to the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements. Members are participating in best practices projects, a current series of workshops being undertaken by the World Bank group and the United Nations relating to urban governance, especially those focused on financing for urban development.

The NGO Committee on Human Settlements cooperates with other organizations in providing information on all aspects of the Habitat Agenda and underscores the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements' collaboration with international initiatives to reduce poverty — for example, the Urban Management Programme with the United Nations Development Programme and the Sustainable Cities Programme with the United Nations Environment Programme. Several members are involved in United Nations system-wide anti-poverty strategies and their links to private sector partnerships, particularly for the creation of better livelihoods and the quest for affordable shelter.

We are encouraged by the response of Member States to General Assembly resolution 55/194 of 20 December 2000, which called, in section V, paragraph 1, for the "inclusion of partner groups in broad-based, gender-balanced national delegations". However, many non-governmental organizations have been disappointed by actions taken during the preparatory process which sought to impede their role as partners with Habitat, one of the unique features of this process which had been approved at the Conference in Istanbul. We are also concerned about the hard line taken by some Member States in connection with people's right to shelter — a right already enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966, and reaffirmed in the Istanbul Declaration and the Habitat Agenda. We are convinced that the right to decent living conditions applied to all citizens will not adversely affect the economies of concerned countries, but, rather, add to the value and assets of the communities involved and have a beneficial multiplier effect on the capacities and resources of poor men, and even poorer women.

In the United Nations system, particularly in Habitat, we would like to participate in more research on regulatory reforms. We are aware of the manner in which restrictive or costly regulations impede the provision of affordable housing, marginalize communities from planning and decision-making bodies, circumscribe certain livelihoods and devalue the participation of the poor in activities affecting the quality of their lives.

In conclusion, we remain committed to the goals of the Habitat Agenda, subscribe to the principles in the draft declaration on cities and look forward to continued collaboration with the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements. We would like to extend our thanks and deep appreciation to the Executive Director for her generous support and the kind cooperation of her staff in making it possible for the NGO Committee and the International Facilitating Group for NGOs to

convene the NGO Forum. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank those Member States that honoured us with a briefing.

The Acting President: We have heard the last speaker in the debate for this meeting.

I shall now call on those representatives who wish to speak in exercise of the right of reply.

May I remind members that statements made in exercise of the right of reply are limited to 10 minutes for the first intervention and to five minutes for the second, and should be made by delegations from their seats.

Mr. Kochazian (Armenia): It was not the intention of my delegation to enter into polemics, but the statement made by the Azerbaijani delegation has provoked us to do so. In that statement, the Azerbaijani representative made groundless and absurd allegations.

As to the terms used, I would like to mention that the whole international community is well aware of who was the real initiator of aggression against the Armenian population residing in many cities, towns and settlements of Azerbaijan and Nagorny Karabakh.

Today Armenia is still suffering from the 10-year blockade imposed by Azerbaijan. As a result of aggressive actions by that country, more than 12,000 houses were damaged and ruined. Seventy-eight educational centres, 62 medical-care posts, 515 kilometres of potable water pipelines, 724 kilometres of irrigation pipelines and 575 kilometres of road are in need of reconstruction and repair. Many villages along the border in various Armenian provinces suffered from artillery fire.

We regret that the Azerbaijani delegation has chosen to embark on such a destructive approach, just when the heads of State of both countries have resumed their efforts to create solid ground for a comprehensive settlement of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict.

We call on the Azerbaijani delegation to refrain from such behaviour and to show respect for the mandate of this special session.

Mr. Al-Kidwa (Palestine) (*spoke in Arabic*): This afternoon the Israeli representative made a statement before this special session. That statement is a heap of distortions and a misrepresentation of facts. Of course, as the Israeli Minister of Construction and Housing, he is the Minister responsible for the establishment of illegal settlements in occupied Palestinian territories. He is the one who, about 10 days ago, announced very enthusiastically the building of new housing units in two settlements, in spite of his Government's claim that it had approved the Mitchell report. In short, he is the Minister responsible for the crime of war, for Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories.

The relocation by the occupying forces of its residents to the occupied territories and the violation by those forces of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 and of many Security Council and General Assembly resolutions constitute war crimes, according to Protocol I additional to the Geneva Conventions and according to the International Criminal Court.

The crimes committed by Israel in the area of housing and human settlements are not confined to the occupied Palestinian territories. Indeed, Israel is engaged in large-scale housing construction on land usurped and stolen from the Palestinians. Israel, according to the United Nations Conciliation Committee, has confiscated about 5.5 million dunums that are privately owned by Palestinian citizens who have been refugees since 1948.

But Israel is not only preventing those people from returning to their homes and lands, not only rejecting relevant United Nations resolutions — it is also refusing to acknowledge Palestinian land ownership and is illegally confiscating that land through, inter alia, the establishment of housing settlements thereon.

Since last year, Israel, the occupying force, has been carrying out a bloody military campaign against the Palestinian people, in the course of which it has committed many war crimes and acts of State terrorism, including the deliberate killing of many of the 500 Palestinians who were martyred during that period.

The root of the problem is the continued Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories through settlement activities, even after considerable progress in the peace process and in spite of all international efforts.

The Palestinian side is now seriously undertaking numerous efforts with many parties, including the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the United States, the European Union and the Russian Federation,

with a view to putting an end to the current tragedy and in order to implement the recommendations contained in the Mitchell report and the Egyptian-Jordanian initiative.

All we can hope for now is that Israel is sincere in its approval of the Mitchell report and that it will immediately commence implementation of the steps to be undertaken in accordance with that report.

Unfortunately, what we have heard today does not augur well. Nevertheless, we have not lost hope.

Mr. Zaki (Egypt) (*spoke in Arabic*): We have listened to the statement made by the representative of Israel at the beginning of this meeting and were not surprised by its contents, which, unfortunately, are totally irrelevant to the subject matter.

Israel refuses to admit that its occupation of Palestinian territories, its resettlement of Jewish immigrants from all parts of the world on Palestinian and Arab lands, and its confiscation of the land under occupation is the main reason for the tragedy and loss of life suffered by both the Palestinian and the Israeli people.

Israeli settlement activities in the territories occupied by Israel by military force are illegal and unlawful under the provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention. No matter how much the representatives of Israel try to dress up the ugly facts or to mislead international public opinion by speaking of terrorism and not occupation, all those desperate attempts will fail.

The Israeli settlers spread violence and call for it. They burn Palestinian crops. Houses are being built for them on occupied and confiscated Arab lands. Their settlements become military citadels that target Palestinian civilians. The presence of those settlers in the occupied territories is a crime in and of itself.

The international community must take a unified and firm stand to bring pressure to bear on Israel to stop its settlement activities immediately. The continuation of these activities under the protection of the occupation forces and Israel's refusal to respect the legitimate national rights of the Palestinian people are the real reasons for the current unbearable suffering of the Palestinians, and the suffering of the Israelis as well.

The meeting rose at 7.15 p.m.